



## EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



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February 2015 | Volume 72 | Number 5

**Improving Schools: What Works?** Pages 30-35

### How We Know Collaboration Works

*Greg Anrig*

**A growing body of research shows that collaboration between teachers and administrators—not confrontation—improves student outcomes.**

For the 12 years that Michael Bloomberg served as mayor of New York City, the Big Apple was home to the United States' largest experiment in implementing the business model of education reform—a model based on sink-or-swim accountability overwhelmingly focused on standardized test data. Under Chancellor Joel Klein, the numbers of public school closings and new charter schools soared, while the high school student assignment system was overhauled to be driven by choice.

The local United Federation of Teachers rebelled against virtually all elements of that agenda as well as Klein's disrespectful management style. The two sides battled relentlessly over matters big and small. By the time the last collective bargaining agreement expired in 2009, relations between the administration and the union had fallen to such a low point that the schools operated without a contract for the remainder of Bloomberg's tenure.

Throughout this period, New York City's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress was not significantly better than that of other cities—and in some cases it was worse (Nation's Report Card, n.d.). High school graduation rates did increase, but favorable demographic changes and the easing of requirements for receiving a diploma may have helped those improvements along (Ravitch, 2013).

Bloomberg's successor, Bill de Blasio, came to office in 2013 as an ardent critic of Bloomberg's style of reform. Vowing to rebuild relations with New York City's teachers and their union, he chose as his chancellor Carmen Fariña, a former teacher and school administrator who had written extensively about the importance of teamwork and collaboration among school stakeholders (Fariña & Kotch, 2008). Less than six months after de Blasio's inauguration, the district administration and the teachers union reached agreement on a nine-year contract, extending retroactively back to 2009, that was resoundingly approved by the rank and file.

In most urban school districts today, relations between administrators and teachers still more closely resemble the Bloomberg/Klein reformist model than the de Blasio/Fariña collaborative one. But evidence is mounting that the latter approach holds much greater promise for improving student outcomes. Research consistently finds that a high degree of trust between administrators and teachers is an essential ingredient in making successful schools tick. Other factors that blossom from that trust are also crucial, including close communication with parents, strong ties with community service providers, effective use of data to identify and respond to problems, and ongoing team-oriented support focused on continually improving teaching practices.

In settings like Bloomberg's New York City, which rely heavily on reforms imposed from on high with little effort to develop buy-in from teachers, the results have generally been disappointing. But more and more success stories are emerging that begin

with administrators reaching out to teachers and their unions to develop a more inclusive culture focused on improving the learning experience of all students.

## The Evidence for Collaboration

In recent years, research has uncovered valuable, consistent evidence about what makes some schools unusually successful. Although there is no silver bullet, the research points to specific organizational practices as integral to improving student outcomes.

The University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research produced the most compelling research of this type (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The consortium gathered demographic and test data and conducted extensive surveys of stakeholders in more than 400 Chicago elementary schools from 1990 to 2005. That treasure trove of information enabled the consortium to determine with a high degree of reliability the organizational characteristics and practices that predict whether a school is likely to produce above-average improvement in student outcomes.

The most crucial finding was that the most effective schools, based on test score improvement over time after controlling for demographic factors, had developed an unusually high degree of "relational trust" among their administrators, teachers, and parents. Five organizational features contributed to this success:

- A coherent instructional guidance system, in which curriculum and assessment were coordinated within and across grades with meaningful teacher involvement.
- An effective system to improve professional capacity by providing ongoing support and guidance for teachers, including opening teachers' classroom work for examination by colleagues and external consultants.
- Strong ties among school personnel, parents, and community service providers, with an integrated support network for students.
- A student-centered learning climate that identified and responded to problems individual students were experiencing.
- Leadership focused on cultivating teachers, parents, and community members so that they became invested in sharing responsibility for the school's improvement.

These five features tended to reinforce one another; a significant weakness in any of them could threaten progress. Schools with strong rankings on all five criteria were 10 times more likely to improve than schools that were weak in the majority of the areas.

The consortium also found that principal leadership was central to initiating and sustaining those organizational changes. Effective principals recognized that improvement must be grounded in continuing efforts to build trust across the school community.

Another ambitious investigation, conducted by the National Center for Educational Achievement (2009), sent teams of researchers to 26 public schools in five states that had a high percentage of low-income students, and whose students had made significant gains on math and science exams in a three-year period. That study's findings were remarkably similar to those of the Chicago consortium. Administrators and teachers in the effective schools worked closely together in developing and selecting instructional materials, assessments, and learning strategies. Teachers had time set aside each week to work with one another to systematically improve instructional practices. Administrators and teachers carefully monitored test data to identify where students and teachers needed additional support. School personnel engaged in regular, extensive communication with parents to coordinate support for students. In many cases, administrators and teachers also worked closely with local community groups and service providers, broadening the network of trained professionals helping children.

Even in other countries, highly collaborative practices in schools are associated with unusually strong student outcomes. The report *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* analyzed school systems in 20 diverse countries that experienced sustained improvement (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). One common thread was a strong reliance on teamwork to identify and respond to problems. In the report's introduction, Michael Fullan explained,

*The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things—for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still—working together generates commitment. (p. 72)*

In New York City, where Chancellor Fariña has introduced numerous changes aimed at pursuing the kinds of practices identified by this research, a long road lies ahead to transform the culture of schools in ways that will improve student outcomes. But a small number of other urban school districts are much further along, and they're beginning to show results that ought to persuade many others to follow suit.

## Cincinnati, Ohio

Perhaps the strongest model in the United States of a collaborative urban school system, Cincinnati has a long history dating

back to the mid-1980s of experimenting with team-based instructional approaches, using innovative compensation systems to reward excellence, and providing career ladders to enable the most effective teachers to coach their colleagues. For example, Cincinnati was the second district in the country to adopt Peer Assistance and Review.

Beginning in 2003, the district pioneered Community Learning Centers (CLCs), in which local providers offer health services, tutoring, after-school activities, and other supports on school grounds. Julie Sellers, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, says,

*The teachers are thankful that the services are in the building because they know that the students' needs will be met. For example, for students whose families don't have enough food over the weekends, there are some CLCs that give out bags of food—called Power Packs—every Friday. All of the food is nutritious and child friendly. That not only meets a dire need, it makes the students feel more secure, which leads to better behavior. (American Federation of Teachers, 2009, p. 43)*

Cincinnati's test scores went from being on a par with those of other struggling school districts early in the last decade to breaking away from the pack. In 2009–10, Cincinnati became the first city to receive *effective* ratings on the Ohio District Report Card. For the four school years from 2009 to 2013, even as poverty rates increased in the city, Cincinnati remained the state's highest-ranked urban school district (Cincinnati Public Schools, 2014).

Mary Ronan, who became the superintendent in 2009 after spending her entire career in the city's school system, started as a middle school math and science teacher in 1976 and rose through the ranks as an administrator. Cincinnati Federation of Teachers president Sellers, who frequently travels with Ronan to educator conferences to share insights about their successful collaboration, told *Education Week*, "Mary probably knows more teachers than any superintendent. I think it has been beneficial to her to get buy-in. Teachers feel comfortable talking to her" (Klein, 2013).

## Springfield, Massachusetts

In 2004, Springfield, the third largest city in Massachusetts, hit rock bottom. A declining economy, corruption, and reduced state aid led to the city being declared insolvent. The state appointed a five-member board to take over all aspects of Springfield's government, including the public schools. Over the next few years, conditions continued to worsen. The local teachers union passed a vote of no confidence in the superintendent, while student test scores and graduation rates languished among the worst in the state (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2012).

In fits and starts, school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders began working to reverse the dysfunction. The district launched a joint labor–management initiative— involving three union members, three district representatives, and a school board member—to survey administrators and teachers to identify the root causes of the schools' problems and to work toward a consensus about how to move forward. One key area of agreement emerged: Teachers needed to be involved in decisions about school operations, including a new process for evaluation that created instructional leadership specialists to help struggling teachers.

In another important development in 2010, the National Education Association Foundation provided grants to create a program called Springfield Collaboration for Change, whose mission was to increase parental and community engagement in the school system. The program built collaborative school leadership teams, provided school-based support coaches, and scaled up parent-teacher home visits to reach more families. The overall approach was to integrate all the resources available to parents and families into a tight network of support for each child.

In contrast to previous highly contentious contract negotiations, the most recent collective bargaining agreement, approved in April 2013, was reached relatively amicably and contains numerous provisions and mechanisms for collaboration between administrators and teachers. It includes this statement:

*The Springfield Public Schools and the Springfield Education Association are committed to raising overall student performance and closing the achievement gap. This requires strong, consistent, and sustained collaboration at all levels in the district, especially between teachers and school administrators.*

In contrast to the district's abysmal performance just a decade ago, Springfield schools made larger composite performance index gains on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests in 2012–13 than both the state as a whole and the average for the 25 largest urban districts.

Truancy dropped by one-third over the past three years. An editorial in the local paper said, "There's a new sense of optimism, possibility, pride, and purpose permeating Springfield schools this year, where the hard work of education reform is beginning to pay off" ("Springfield Schools See Big Boost in Test Scores, Morale," 2013).

## Hillsborough County, Florida

The eighth largest school district in the United States, encompassing the cities of Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clear-water in

western Florida, Hillsborough County has pursued collaborative practices for decades. That culture can be traced back to a strike in 1968 arising from state funding cuts, which prompted local administrators and the teachers union to join forces in protest. During the next 30 years, the district evolved shared decision making in such areas as curriculum alignment, test writing, textbook selection, and professional development.

Unlike most school districts, Hillsborough has also benefitted from minimal turnover in leadership, with only four superintendents since 1968 (Rubinstein & McCarthy, 2011). Current superintendent MaryEllen Elia, who has served in that role since 2005, has worked for the district for 28 years and was a teacher for 19 years.

With about 57 percent of its students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, Hillsborough has outperformed many wealthier districts in Florida. From 2008 to 2010, Hillsborough County had the largest annual increase in advanced placement exam passing grades of any district in the United States. On the 2012 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Hillsborough's 4th graders posted the second-highest average writing scores of any district in the state. Tenth grade averages also were second highest, and 8th grade scores were third highest.

## Turning the Tide

Other urban districts in the United States have made clear progress in developing a collaborative culture between administrators and teachers, including New Haven and Meriden, Connecticut; Montgomery County and Baltimore, Maryland; St. Louis, Missouri; St. Paul, Minnesota; Nashua, New Hampshire; Union City, New Jersey; and the Capistrano and ABC Unified Districts, California. Teams of administrators and teachers from another 25 cities have been meeting regularly through gatherings convened by regional chapters of the [Teacher Union Reform Network](#) to pursue more collaborative practices.

And even Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who for years has supported policies and echoed rhetoric associated with top-down, competitive school reform, may be shifting toward endorsing collaboration between labor and management. A 2012 U.S. Department of Education white paper argued that

*tough-minded collaboration ... will lead to more effective practices and a more sustainable path to elevating education than the ups and downs of adversarial relationships that have long characterized labor-management relations. (p. 4)*

If increasing numbers of school districts pursue collaboration and begin to see the kinds of improved student outcomes experienced in places like Cincinnati, Springfield, and Hillsborough County, the tide may at last turn toward a more productive approach toward school reform—one that is ultimately better for students than the disappointing fads of the past.

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[Greg Anrig](#) is vice president of policy and programs at the Century Foundation. He is the author of *Beyond the Education Wars: Evidence That Collaboration Builds Effective Schools* (Century Foundation, 2013).

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