BUILDING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEMAND FOR DRAMATIC CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

By Dana Brinson and Lucy Steiner

MAY 2012

PUBLIC IMPACT

About the authors

DANA BRINSON is a senior consultant with Public Impact. She has conducted research and analysis on a wide variety of education issues, including educational philanthropy, school improvement and turnarounds, disconnected youth, talent assessment and selection, and charter schools. Ms. Brinson leads project teams and conducts critical fact-finding through interviews, literature reviews, site visits, and other qualitative methods. Ms. Brinson previously worked as a special educator at a Boston-area public school for teens with behavioral and emotional challenges and learning disabilities. She is a summa cum laude graduate of West Virginia University and holds a master's degree in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

LUCY STEINER is a senior consultant with Public Impact. She researches and consults on a variety of critical education issues, including teacher and leader policy, school restructuring, charter school policy, and teacher professional development. Ms. Steiner both conducts her own work and leads project teams to deliver research, training, and consulting. Her work often provides a bridge between district leadership, school leadership, and instruction. A former high school English teacher, Ms. Steiner holds a master's degree in education and social policy from Northwestern University, and a B.A. with highest honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the generous support of The Joyce Foundation and NewSchools Venture Fund. The authors are grateful to John Luczak, Angela Rudolph, and Jordan Meranus for their guidance, and, for assistance and helpful guidance, to Phyllis Lockett and Katheryn Hayes of The Renaissance Schools Fund (now New Schools for Chicago), and Bryan Hassel, Emily Ayscue Hassel, and Sharon Kebschull Barrett of Public Impact. The authors would also like to thank the many individuals from community-based organizations, urban school districts, school turnaround organizations, charter school operators, faith-based organizations, and philanthropic foundations interviewed in this research.

Public Impact's mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the U.S., with a special focus on students who are not served well. A national education policy and management consulting firm based in Chapel Hill, NC, Public Impact is a team of researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants working with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit: www.publicimpact.com.

Please cite this report as: Brinson, D., & Steiner, L. (2012). *Building family and community demand for dramatic change in schools*. Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact. Retrieved from http://publicimpact.com/building_demand_for_dramatic_change_in_schools-public_impact.pdf

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INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of efforts to improve failing schools, too many students still attend chronically low-performing schools.[1] In these schools, district and school-level efforts have fallen far short of the dramatic changes necessary to effect significant, quick, and sustained improvements. The history of failed school reform efforts is characterized by a cycle of ineffective reforms followed by a return to the status quo. In 10 years at one elementary school in Chicago alone, administrators spent $20 million over and above normal expenses with no effect on student achievement.[2] This cycle provides little incentive for school staff to get on board with new reforms, and it confirms for parents that nothing will change, especially in our country's most challenged communities.

Because policymakers have seen little success in turning around persistently low-performing schools using incremental changes such as support teams and increased professional development, many are now committed to more dramatic improvement strategies that upend the status quo and, if successful, result in sharp improvement in student outcomes.

Adding further incentives to implement dramatic reforms, recent changes to federal and state grant guidelines include new definitions for the types of reforms needed in failing schools.[3] The new options include[4]:

1. **CLOSURE:** Schools are closed, and students attend other schools in the district.
2. **RESTART:** The school is closed and then reopened under the management of an external partner (either charter or contract).
3. **TURNAROUND:** The principal and at least 50 percent of the staff are replaced, and the educational program is revised.
4. **TRANSFORMATION.** The principal is replaced, and changes are made in the educational programs (e.g., professional development, instruction, curriculum, learning time, and operating flexibility).

In addition, federal policy supports a fifth option: opening promising new schools, primarily charter schools, which could potentially leverage improvements in low-performing district schools as well.

When education reformers come into communities and begin introducing reform efforts to replace principals and staff (either through closures, new schools, or turnarounds), a strong sense of urgency drives them. Children, they argue, cannot afford to lose another year in a low-performing school—a year that research suggests will, for better or worse, affect the trajectory of their entire education.[5]

"I believe that when communities don't understand the purpose of a change, it is because they are unaware that there's a problem. If that's the case, any change seems to happen all of a sudden. It's just that the reality has been hidden from the community for a long time."

—PASTOR WALTER MATTHEW
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

But too often, reformers' zeal for decisive, quick action and their commitment to justice for children in low-income communities runs into opposition from members of the community they aim to serve. Many communities have long endured dysfunctional schools, dismal graduation rates, and limited opportunities for their children. They want better — but they have seen reformers and programs come and go to little effect, leaving them understandably skeptical about new efforts. In addition, many communities do not know just how low performing their own schools are, what great schools look like, or that it is possible for their communities' schools to dramatically improve.

These community members are unlikely to embrace new efforts, especially from reformers unfamiliar with the school and neighborhood history who claim to know what is best for the children. In fact, community members may regard reformers as arrogant and offensive. Consequently, families and community members — seemingly inexplicably to reformers — may come to the defense of a failing school, in part because of personal connections to the school or its staff. A lack of trust and a troubled history of poor communication between education leaders and communities form a weak foundation on which to build a change effort.

This is not how it has to be. Reformers and community stakeholders both want great schools for children, making it possible to build a shared sense of purpose. Reformers' efforts can gain traction and build long-term sustainability with the support of the community. Collaboration between reformers and communities in support of bold change is hard won and can be tenuous. Without it, though, many dramatic reform efforts will likely wither on the vine.

Recognizing the importance of building community demand for school reform efforts, community and education leaders have begun to look more deeply at various modes of engagement and which approaches work in different circumstances.[6] Public Agenda, a national public opinion research and public engagement organization, recently published a guide for school leaders on building effective communication and engagement when improving low-performing schools.[7] To date, however, little research has focused on building community demand for dramatic change in schools. To learn more about these efforts, Public Impact's Dana Brinson and Lucy Steiner reached out to 28 leaders in school districts, community organizations, charter school management organizations, school turnaround providers, and foundations across the country. This summary report highlights the major findings from our work and provides several lessons learned.[8] This report concludes with three vignettes on efforts to build community demand for dramatic change in Denver, Philadelphia, and Chicago schools.[9]

As we interviewed people, we heard a refrain: It is past time for school reform leaders to make genuine efforts at community and family engagement. Frankly, several people we interviewed were skeptical that districts can ever do this engagement work well; they had seen too many dismal failures to remain hopeful. We saw evidence, however, that some districts recognized the necessity of family and community support, and understood the costs of failing to engage stakeholders effectively in making dramatic changes. This report is for policymakers who want to learn from the successes and failures of others who have undertaken this difficult work.

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY DEMAND-BUILDING

District leaders driving for quick, dramatic reforms in long-failing schools often hesitate to seek community input in the decision-making process or to invest significant time in building community support for their plans. But the potential upsides are too big to ignore. Community engagement can:

- **PROVIDE LEGITIMACY FOR CHANGE EFFORTS.** Family and community engagement helps legitimize school reform efforts in the eyes of the broader community.
- **ENHANCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS.** When parents are engaged, some evidence indicates that children do better academically and that change efforts are more likely to succeed.[10]
- **LIMIT CHANCES FOR THE OPPOSITION TO GAIN TRACTION.** Engaging community stakeholders in reform efforts can empower parents in the change process and make it difficult for detractors to oppose the will of their communities.
- **SUSTAIN REFORMS BEYOND INITIAL CHANGE EFFORTS.** Parents who get involved in a successful change effort are more likely to engage in long-term efforts to hold education leaders accountable for improved student outcomes.

Challenges to building community demand for change exist, and often deter reformers from reaping the benefits above. But each challenge is navigable and, with planning and foresight, can be overcome. None of these challenges warrants sidestepping community engagement in dramatic school reforms:

- **TIME**—Building relationships takes time. Leaders seeking rapid change in failing schools may view building trust over many months as unnecessary in light of other urgent priorities.
- **RELINQUISHING SOME CONTROL**—True engagement requires giving community members some control over the effort, a risk some reformers dislike taking.
- **RESISTANCE AMONG COMMUNITY MEMBERS**— Sometimes communities resist change efforts for good reasons, including: weak relationships with reformers, a history of poor communication, failed past reform efforts, and little understanding of how much better schools can be. Community engagement efforts that allow reformers to better understand the reasons for resistance can provide critical information about overcoming these barriers.

Balancing an urgency for reform with the necessity of building trust over time requires finesse and a commitment to the engagement process. Recognizing the challenges early and developing a plan to mitigate them can allow reformers to reap the benefits of student and school success that can result from strong community engagement.

"Everyone wants change, as long as it doesn't affect them in any way."

—DR. ANDRES ALONSO
CEO, BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS

Change is difficult. Often, the fear of something new—particularly when past efforts have failed—can outweigh community members' desire for the potential benefits of change. "Everyone wants change," said Dr. Andres Alonso, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, "as long as it doesn't affect them in any way."

The first steps in building a viable community demand-building process are to effectively prepare for the difficult work of making the actual changes in schools, and to take into consideration stakeholders' natural skepticism regarding these changes. Our research confirmed the following key takeaways in developing and executing an engagement strategy:

- **KNOW WHERE YOU ARE HEADED**—Education leaders and their partners must agree on a shared vision of quality schooling; understand the potential complications that may arise given the history of interaction between the school district and community; and develop a coherent strategy to navigate those challenges while working toward the goal of a high-quality school for all students.
- **SHOW COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHAT IS POSSIBLE—AND HOW THEIR OWN SCHOOLS FALL SHORT.** Give people clear examples of high-quality schools serving children and communities like their own. School visits and personal testimony from parents and students prove more effective than dry performance data.
- **RECOGNIZE THAT TRUST TAKES TIME—DON'T EMPHASIZE URGENCY OVER RELATIONSHIPS.** With families, balance a sense of urgency with building support for change. Engage and listen early and often, long before decisions get made.

- **DON'T INTRODUCE A LOSS (SCHOOL CLOSURE, REPLACEMENT OF PRINCIPAL) WITHOUT A CLEAR PLAN FOR REPLACING THAT LOSS WITH SOMETHING BETTER.** School closure and turnaround efforts need to be closely aligned with replacement efforts (e.g., new school, new principal, new staff).
- **FOCUS ON QUALITY.** Labels such as "charter school" or "turnaround" are less important to community members than the idea of what a good school looks like and a plan to work toward that.
- **EARLY ON, BE TRANSPARENT AND CLEAR ABOUT THE DECISION-MAKING ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY.** If you are giving the community a role, make it genuine, and explain its limitations early. Vet choices provided to the community so all choices drive positive change.
- **USE IMPACT AND INFLUENCE STRATEGIES SKILLFULLY.** Partner with community organizations when helpful, deploy political capital sparingly, and communicate frequently with key influencers so they are briefed as the effort evolves.
- **COUNTER CRITICS BY TOUTING SUCCESSES.** From the beginning, be vigilant in disseminating information about successes. "Early wins" are an effective way to silence critics and win allies for change.
- **MANAGE EXPECTATIONS.** Indicate that there will be some setbacks, and then share results openly. Admit problems as they arise and be willing to change course to solve those problems.

EFFECTIVE DEMAND-BUILDING STRATEGIES

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1. **Assess political landscape**
2. **Develop a coherent strategy**
3. **Identify audiences**
4. **Identify messengers**
5. **Build trust with families and communities**
6. **Justify hopefulness, communicate reality**
7. **Define stakeholder roles**
8. **Measure success**
9. **Sustain the momentum**

"If you're going to try to rush the process and are not genuine in your efforts to engage the community, you may as well save your time and theirs."

—YANA SMITH, DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In addition to the key takeaways above, our research highlighted some common steps to successful efforts to build support for change. Consider the steps below, and the barriers to involvement for community members (see sidebar on page 7) in order to design a more effective engagement effort.

Assess political landscape

Recognize early the roles of ego and politics in the engagement process, and do not let either hijack the effort. Start by asking questions about the barriers that could affect your work to engage families and communities. Questions include:

- How familiar are community members with your organization?
- Will the community see you as an ally based on past work?
- Are there historical conflicts between your organization and the community?
- What is the power dynamic between your organization and the community?

Develop a coherent strategy

Interviewees strongly recommended developing strategies for both the school improvement process and the community engagement process *before* engaging the community. These intertwined strategies should guide your early efforts, and be based on an understanding of local issues and the history of schools, communities, and relationships with the district.

The strategy should include:

1. **GOALS:** the goals of change efforts and the engagement process.
2. **PEOPLE:** who should be included in the engagement process.
3. **ROLES:** the role of the community stakeholders in decision-making.
4. **COORDINATION:** the alignment of various stakeholder efforts (e.g., decisions and actions are made in a single district department rather than across silos).
5. **LANGUAGE:** a common, clear language for change and engagement to build community understanding and trust.
6. **PROACTIVE MEASURES:** well-developed responses to anticipated attacks from detractors.

Identify audiences

It can be a challenge to identify who represents "the community" and the best forums for engagement. Interviews revealed the usefulness of viewing the community as having different layers, all of which need to be pulled into the engagement process:

- **SCHOOL** — older students, staff, and parents.
- **NEIGHBORHOOD** — faith leaders, community-based organization leaders, politicians, business owners, key local influencers, and families who have opted out of public schools.
- **CITY OR REGION** — professionals familiar with reform efforts, city council members, politicians, activists, union leaders, faith leaders.

Community engagement practitioners emphasized the importance of choosing committee members who represent the community as much as possible, so the larger community will view the process as valid. The process for selecting a committee that provides broad representation must be fair and transparent, to build trust in the process and the committee's decisions.

For more on how to effectively engage various layers of community members, see "Philadelphia — Learning from Past Mistakes" (page 15).

Identify messengers

Find the right people to carry your message to the community. Sincere, engaged listeners who can genuinely interact with (rather than talk at) community members are the most valuable asset in a community engagement process. Avoid slick speakers who can alienate skeptical stakeholders. The best messengers have "calling cards" that give then credibility with the community (see box).

Community members who ask thoughtful, probing questions in large meetings should be brought on board to leverage their influence in their neighborhoods.

Interviews also revealed the importance of identifying the firebrands and detractors and engaging them outside of large meetings to hear their concerns and potentially neutralize their in-meeting antagonism. Informing naysayers about the work your organization is doing and keeping lines of communication open can sometimes win over detractors to be your biggest supporters.

MESSENGER "CALLING CARDS"

- **EXPERIENCE** (e.g., led previous school turnaround)
- **CHARACTERISTICS** (e.g., race, ethnicity, local roots)
- **EXPERTISE** (e.g., data analysis)
- **WHAT THEY BRING TO THE TABLE** (e.g., operator bringing responsive teachers to the community)
- **TITLES** (e.g., "big names" can validate the process).

Barriers to Building Family and Community Demand for Dramatic Change

1. **LACK OF TRUST,** based on past experiences between the community and district —a central barrier to engagement in dramatic change.
2. **LIMITED COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING** about the current level of performance at a school and what is possible.
3. **HISTORY OF PAST FAILURES** inhibiting community's belief that new efforts will succeed.
4. **LACK OF EVIDENCE** for promising but somewhat untested changes or changes not yet tried locally.
5. **ORGANIZED OPPOSITION** by established interests who use their access and influence with parents to organize against dramatic change efforts.
6. **PERCEPTION OF POWERLESSNESS** among community members who believe they have little influence over the situation.
7. **UNCLEAR BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION** for families and communities to advocate for change.
8. **TOO MUCH EFFORT REQUIRED** from families and community given competing priorities.

MESSENGERS WHO CAN SHOW SUCCESS IS POSSIBLE

- **PEOPLE WHO HAVE VISITED HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS** that serve similar communities.
- **ARTICULATE STUDENTS** from successful schools that underwent a similar process.
- **PARENTS** from schools managed by the same organization that will run a new school.
- **TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS** who will be interacting directly with children in a new/transformed/turned-around school.
- **LOCAL POLITICAL, FAITH, AND DISTRICT LEADERS** who demonstrate broad support for the process and proposed changes.

In addition to using messengers to show success is possible, achieving early successes in schools will build momentum for change, increase support for further changes, and silence naysayers.

Build trust with families and communities

Building trust is the most critical element to building community demand for dramatic change in schools. This requires an ongoing effort—not a single step in the process. Every component of an engagement effort, from initial plans and choosing messengers to being honest about successes and setbacks, can build or erode trust.

Building trust requires clearly understanding past mistakes that have engendered community distrust. Recognize these mistakes, come with a plan to repair this mistrust, and follow through on commitments. Most important, remember that building trust takes time.

"If you're going to try to rush the process and are not genuine in your efforts to engage the community, you may as well save your time and theirs," Yana Smith of Denver Public Schools said. Reformers must balance their strong sense of urgency and commitment to change with the real need for community engagement and trust-building to sustain efforts long-term.

Justify hopefulness, communicate reality

Reformers can begin to build trust by showing community members and families the possibilities for their schools and how that vision of hope differs dramatically from the current reality. Research has shown that hope develops when individuals can set realistic goals, figure out how to achieve those goals by staying flexible and trying alternative routes to a goal, and believe that they can accomplish the goals.[11] Community engagement leaders should help build each of these components in their work with parents and community members.

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted visits to high-performing schools as the most effective way to change a community's view of what is possible and set new goals for

their own schools. They also emphasized describing in plain terms how the new school will be different using powerful messengers, such as students, parents, principals, and teachers who have experienced the different school environment. When showing what is possible, be cautious about assuming that a successful model used elsewhere in the country will be warmly embraced locally. Families and communities need evidence that the model fits them and their children and that they clearly understand how any approach will achieve the goals of dramatically improved outcomes for their children.

When presenting options and choosing approaches to school improvement, it is crucial to build family and community belief that the work is not easy, but is possible. While justifying hope that changes will result in strong schools, it is equally important to recognize the current reality and the limited results of past improvement efforts. When owning up to past failures that occurred on the district's watch, it may be prudent to involve a third-party organization to explain current school failures and the proposed process for moving forward. The district may not be the best messenger to say, "We know we have failed you in the past, but trust us this time." In Denver, for example, the district partnered with A+ Denver, an independent organization formed to build community demand and support for school reform. A+ Denver facilitated community engagement for the district around various closure, turnaround, and restart initiatives.

"A third-party organization helps provide a mechanism to ensure the community feels heard and is an authentic part of the process," said Mike Guinan, who worked with A+ Denver. "It diffuses some tension, because the second the community thinks the district has taken over the project, trust is lost, and the community won't engage."

In addition to choosing the right messengers, make sure the message is clear and accessible. Do not inundate communities with indecipherable data. Use interactive presentations; activities that allow stakeholders to evaluate the pros and cons of specific actions; and skill-building exercises to engage participants and educate them about the components of strong schools and how current schools fall short.

Define stakeholder roles

Early in the process, and regularly throughout the engagement efforts, make the community's role clear to participants. It may range from being kept informed of district decisions, to developing criteria to guide district decision-making, to being directly involved in decisions. Districts and other stakeholders must consider the benefits and drawbacks of each option in their local context, while developing an opportunity for authentic engagement.

Do not assume that every community member has the skills and knowledge to effectively fill the roles available to them. Interviewees expressed the importance of preparing stakeholders to develop and use such skills as serving as ambassadors of their communities, advocating for community interests, understanding school performance data, and using data in decision-making.

As you empower community members to be full participants in the school change process, continue to clarify their role in decision-making. "You must be clear about their role up front; otherwise, people will feel like you've wasted their time," Yana Smith of Denver Public Schools said.

Measure success

Develop ways to measure both the success of specific engagement efforts as well as progress toward the ultimate goal of excellent schools that are healthy, safe, engaging, and responsive. Interviewees admitted that they have not generally developed effective measures of success for the *engagement efforts* themselves and have instead relied on long-term school outcomes. For example, district leaders would measure success based on student performance in a school undergoing turnaround rather than on any measures of effective family engagement in the turnaround process.

For this reason, focus on measuring success in each of the following areas:

- **DEMAND** — Evaluate the strength of community demand for the changes you seek to make — the single most important measure. Do so early in the process, and at checkpoints along the way, because a process that makes people feel heard but leaves naysayers in the majority will fail.
- **KNOWLEDGE** — Measure the increase in community knowledge about what is possible and the current reality in schools.
- **TRUST** — Assess community members' perceptions of the process throughout. Determine if community members feel heard and respected, and if they believe education leaders will act in the best interests of their children.

Use both technology and more traditional methods to gather formative measures of family engagement such as attendance levels at events, qualitative survey responses, and phone calls made to constituents. Use these measures to guide midcourse corrections and redouble effective efforts.

Achieve success in schools

Community meetings, outreach, and other forms of engagement can only go so far toward building trust and demand for change. Ultimately, community members must see change in motion and observe visible, meaningful "wins" in schools. Initial wins might be cosmetic – improving a school's physical appearance. Initial wins might also lay the groundwork for future success; for example, major improvements in attendance and student behavior.

But quickly, wins need to be real improvements in academic outcomes. At least within some segments of the school, students need to be making obvious, dramatic progress – significant enough to convince people that success is possible at the school. Research on turnarounds in a variety of industries suggests that it's these early wins that build demand for more change. They also undermine the position of naysayers and opponents of transformation.

Sustain the momentum

After the initial engagement, do not squander the precious resource of active and involved family and community members. Maintain engagement and commitment to change by:

- **COMMUNICATING SUCCESSES** clearly to show that change is possible, and that engaged family and community members directly contributed to that change.
- **COLLECTING AND ACTING ON INTERNAL FEEDBACK** to continually improve the effectiveness of engagement efforts.
- **PROVIDING ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES** for people to remain involved in monitoring and implementation of change efforts.
- **REWARDING ENGAGEMENT** and support through recognition ceremonies and other events.

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, for example, holds an Oscars-type event each year to reward family and community members who have contributed to the schools' successes throughout the year. "There's a red carpet, people dress up, and we give out awards. It's an event that folks love, and they are even greater school advocates afterwards," noted Marshall Tuck of the Partnership.

CONCLUSION

Even with strong leadership and district support, it is difficult to make dramatic improvements in low-performing schools. Research into organizational turnarounds in education and in other sectors suggests that many efforts will fail the first or even the second time.[12] In this challenging environment, long-term parental and community support is critical. Because they are in the strongest position to hold school and district leaders accountable for school quality, committed community leaders and parents with an unwavering vision of what good schooling looks like have the potential to be a powerful force for change.

Our interviewees reported that they see very few examples of members of low-income communities taking this kind of leadership. On the contrary, in many cities, community leaders who could be powerful change agents are instead strong defenders of the status quo. To succeed, reformers committed to breakthrough improvements in failing schools must change this dynamic.

First, they must better understand why community members oppose change, and under what circumstances they likely would lend their support. This report begins that process, but much work remains. The district, education, faith, and community leaders we interviewed expressed a desire to learn from the successes and failures of others, and to better understand how leaders of dramatic change efforts overcame the inevitable challenges. As policymakers emboldened to make dramatic changes work harder to bring community members on board, they will need significantly more research into such efforts.

DENVER

Sharing the Challenges of, and Responsibility for, Change with the Community

Far Northeast Denver, a 30-minute drive outside downtown Denver, is a community of working-class people of color. The community boasts several groups of concerned citizens who want to find a solution to severe school overcrowding, which had resulted in waiting lists for even the lowest-performing schools. "It was a region prime for school change efforts," said Yana Smith, strategic manager of the Office of School Reform and Innovation at Denver Public Schools.

In spring 2010, Denver Public Schools (DPS) began to gather community insights and input into change efforts slated for the 2011–12 school year. DPS worked with a third-party organization, A+ Denver, to form an advisory committee of concerned citizens who would generate guiding principles for school changes and make recommendations to the school board based on those principles.

A+ Denver worked with DPS to formalize a committee of 45 teachers, parents, community members, business owners, and others in April 2010. For guidance and to set the tone of the meetings, Superintendent Tom Boasberg charged the committee with exploring six issues in Far Northeast Denver and proposing solutions:

1. Understanding academic performance in the schools;
2. Meeting the needs of English language learners;
3. Alleviating school overcrowding;
4. Identifying the need for new schools;
5. Configuring local schools in new ways (e.g., co-locations of charters and district schools); and
6. Analyzing feeder school patterns.

The first five spring meetings focused initially on developing and honing a common set of principles to guide the committee and the school board in its decision-making processes. These principles embodied the hopes of the community for their children and schools, and the development of the principles built rapport and a working relationship among committee members.

District representatives and A+ Denver then guided the committee through the options available for improving their schools. "In the Far Northeast Denver case, we discussed all the options available to us—charters, co-located schools, turnarounds, transformations, and closures. Everything was on the table," Yana Smith said. Educating the community about the available options, their benefits and drawbacks, and the

The Right Ingredients for Effective Engagement in Denver

1. A superintendent with a strong commitment to community engagement.
2. Third-party organizations to facilitate the district's engagement efforts and ensure authentic roles for the community.
3. Clear roles for the community to weigh the pros and cons of various options and make recommendations to the superintendent and school board, with the board making the ultimate decisions.
4. Participation in committee meetings by key district leaders to validate the process in the eyes of the committee members and provide direct engagement between committee members and decision-makers.

"In the district, we forget we only talk in jargon and education terminology. This engagement process is necessary to educate the community about what these terms mean to them in their daily lives.

—YANA SMITH, DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

consequences of each decision helped community members understand the complex choices facing the district.

The committee conversations then focused on taking multiple issues into consideration. They would consider, for example, closing a low-performing middle school and giving a charter operator an opportunity to open a new school in its place. Then the committee would compare the benefits and drawbacks of that with other options of co-locating the two schools or closing and reopening the school as something else. This process of weighing *options,* or school-by-school decisions based on data, and then placing them in *scenarios* that include multiple options working together, reflected a deliberate effort to build committee members' understanding and capacity to work alongside the district. "This is the part that began to feel like a chess game," Yana Smith said.

Also critical, Smith noted, was being clear throughout on the role of the committee. At each stage of the process, the committee was invited to ask for further clarification and submit comments, which the district responded to as it developed the next set of scenarios—but Smith and other district officials were clear that the school board would ultimately decide which options to choose.

Make Meetings Work for the Community

Yana Smith of Denver Public Schools admits that her district has not always hit the mark with its engagement efforts. "Until last year, we had large, all-community meetings, and we'd share data about how horrible the schools were. We didn't come with our plans to fix the schools, or plans to engage the community in our turnaround efforts. We'd deliver the harsh news, and then go home. It was a disaster."

Not surprisingly, these engagement efforts failed to build community understanding of or support for district efforts to improve student achievement and school quality. Smith and other interviewees encouraged districts to make these meetings work for the community by considering the following:

1. **MESSENGERS:** Have messengers who can take the tough talk and work through the community distrust without taking it personally.
2. **REPRESENTATIVES:** Have the right people in the room—if you're bringing in charters, have charter operators in the room to make the case directly to the community.
3. **VENUES:** Make meetings the right size (not all town-hall style, not all small groups) and hold them at times and places convenient for community members to participate.
4. **MEETINGS:** Make them engaging by providing interactive technology, access to the educational providers, and food and entertainment.
5. **ADVERTISING:** Get the word out by providing materials in relevant languages in places where families will find them (grocery stores, Laundromats, churches).
6. **TIME:** Meet several times over the course of many months to demonstrate the district's commitment to the process, building rapport, and rebuilding trust.

PHILADELPHIA

Learning from Past Mistakes

In 2002, the School District of Philadelphia undertook its most substantial school improvement effort to date, placing 45 of its more than 250 schools under the management of private entities. Half went to for-profit education management organization (EMO) Edison Schools, and the other half went to other for-profit and nonprofit organizations, including universities.

"It was very controversial and generated a lot of community outrage because it was *done to* the communities, and there were no positive results for students, either," said Tim Field, former deputy chief of Charter Partnerships and New Schools in the district. A much more modest and successful effort took place in 2004, when Mastery Charter Schools opened a high school and then took over three other schools gradually (a grade or two each year). "Mastery had dramatic results, with improved student scores, climate, and physical plant at these schools, but the results were not as visible to the larger community."

This background of community anger, distrust, and perception that the district had "given kids away" to private entities posed a significant hurdle for the district to overcome to successfully implement Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's 2009 Renaissance Schools five-year strategic plan to turn around the district's lowest-performing schools.

The district began with a Renaissance Schools Advisory Board (RSAB) of almost 60 members with representatives from across the city, including political, religious, and community leaders. The RSAB developed guiding principles to inform the district's decision-making process for choosing schools for the Renaissance Schools initiative.

"This process gave community members a feeling that the decisions were not just 'handed down by the district' but informed by the communities," Field said.

The RSAB was to create processes to: 1) identify schools for the Renaissance Schools Initiative, 2) vet potential providers such as charter management organizations, and 3) engage families and communities in the school turnaround efforts. The RSAB developed these processes over two months, held eight community forums to gather insight and feedback, and identified potential Renaissance schools.

The district, with guidance from the RSAB, chose 14 schools for consideration as Renaissance schools. The initial plan was to choose about five of the 14 for turnaround the first year. After the RSAB recommended five schools, however, Superintendent Ackerman chose to explore the possibility of turnaround efforts in all 14 schools.

Thirty education providers expressed interest in providing educational management

Who Represents "Community"?

The School District of Philadelphia and city leaders sought community input and engagement at multiple levels to implement the Renaissance Schools Initiative.

Renaissance Schools Advisory Board was established to design the school selection and community engagement process. This citywide board of almost 60 members included city leaders and largely consisted of professionals with established knowledge about school reform efforts from faith communities, the mayor's office, the district, and area businesses.

School Advisory Councils were established at each potential Renaissance school to choose an education provider, and then serve an ongoing monitoring and support role to hold the provider and district accountable as the schools turned around.

Community forums were held to gather additional input from community members about proposed plans.

for them, and the district narrowed the field to six providers with strong qualifications. These six were presented as options to each of the potential Renaissance schools.

School advisory councils established at each potential school agreed upon community priorities, gathered input from other community members, reviewed the six potential providers, visited existing schools run by the providers, and made recommendations to the district for the providers they wanted to operate their schools. "Looking back, we needed to help School Advisory Council members develop the skills to effectively vet potential providers, and we needed to make sure that councils visited providers' existing schools to really understand what the proposed schools looked like in action," Field said.

At the end of this process, Ackerman matched seven schools with providers at a public meeting. Six schools received their first choice, and one received its second choice. School Advisory Council members, families, students, and other stakeholders were thrilled with the outcome, expressing their support for the decision with a standing ovation for the district. Failed past reforms and a history of district decisions made with little community input had hardened community distrust of the district and its ability to turn schools around. "But after the superintendent's decision to place schools with the community's operators of choice, it was a love fest," Tim Field said.

Philadelphia still faces a long road to reform, but these experiences provide some useful examples for other districts with similar challenges.

CHICAGO

The Perils of Disjointed Reforms and Communication

In 2004, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley launched a school reform initiative called Renaissance 2010 with the goal of opening 100 new schools by 2010 in Chicago's most underserved neighborhoods. A recent analysis had revealed that several Chicago communities did not have a single public school that provided a high-quality education. Renaissance 2010 was designed to provide new charter, performance, and contract schools to these communities, creating better options for students and families. At the same time, other Chicago Public Schools (CPS) offices were to close low-performing schools, reassign buildings to new charter schools, and identify schools for turnaround.

These siloed offices did not always coordinate the closure of a school with the presentation of a better option for families and the community. Interviewees reported that district announcements about school closures were not aligned with announcements about school improvement efforts in the same neighborhoods. As a result, buildings would sometimes sit empty for a year or two before new schools opened, attendance zones for students would often change over the summer, and community members were generally unsure of the district's ultimate plans for the schools, buildings, or communities.

District leaders and community organizers acknowledge that district efforts to engage Chicago communities have fallen short. Interviews with community organizers and other stakeholders, including former and current district officials, suggest that several factors have influenced community opposition and mistrust:

- District decisions were perceived as secretive, heavy-handed, and uninformed by community and family insights about their children's schools and needs.
- District officials didn't always acknowledge or understand established community efforts to improve local schools.
- District claims of urgency did not resonate well with community members who felt their past pleas for reform had been ignored by the district over several years.

In 2011, Jean-Claude Brizard became CEO of the Chicago Public Schools under newly elected Mayor Rahm Emmanuel. In public interviews he has acknowledged the need to engage community members more effectively. When asked what he had to tell Chicago in a media interview, his first response was about community engagement: "We know a lot of reform has been pushed on the system. What we want to do is — step one — step back and talk to a lot of people."[13]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blank, M. J., Berg, A. C., & Melaville, A. (2006). *Growing community schools: The role of cross-boundary leadership.* Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools. Retrieved from http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Growing_COMM_Schools.pdf

Ferguson, C. (2008). *The school-family connection: Looking at the larger picture, A review of current literature*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved from http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/sfclitrev.pdf

Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Annual Synthesis.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Retrieved from http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf

Hirota, J., & Jacobs, L. (2003). *Vital voices: Building constituencies for public school reform.* New York: Academy for Educational Development, and Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/98.pdf

NOTES

1. In the 2008-09 school year, more than 5000 Title I schools (10 percent of Title I schools) were in restructuring under No Child Left Behind after at least six years of failing to make adequate yearly progress. See: Center on Education Policy. (2009, December). *Improving low-performing schools: Lessons from five years of studying school restructuring under No Child Left Behind.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?DocumentSubSubTopicID=2. Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins identified 2000 high schools (one-tenth of all high schools in the nation) as dropout factories based on schools that have four-year graduation rates of 60% or lower. See: Balfanz, R. & Legters, N. (2004, September). *Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? Where are they located? Who attends them?* Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. Retrieved from: http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report70.pdf.

2. Steiner, L. (2009). *Tough decisions: Closing persistently low performing schools*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Tough_Decisions.pdf

3. Federal guidelines for the Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation and School Improvement Grants all provide guidance on implementing dramatic reforms to turn around our country's lowest-performing schools and scale up successful approaches. RttT Guidance: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/faq.pdf. SIG guidance: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sigguidance02232011.pdf. Investing in Innovation: http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-5147.pdf

4.For more on how federal School Improvement Grants have affected family engagement, see: Brown, J., Muirhead, M., Redding, S., & Witherspoon, B. (2011, April). *Changing the conversation with families in persistently low-achieving high schools: Guidance for implementation of school improvement grants.* Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved from http://www.centerii.org/survey/downloads/Promising_Practices_ChngTheConversation.pdf

5. Research demonstrates that students taught by bottom-quartile teachers learn, on average, half a year's growth academically, while students with top-quartile teachers learn a year and a half's growth, on average. The effects of having a bottom-quartile or top-quartile teacher extend for years for individual students. See: Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, J. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center. Retrieved from http://www.cgp.upenn.edu/pdf/Sanders_Rivers-TVASS_teacher%20effects.pdf

6. For a recent addition to the limited research around building community engagement in public education, see: Orr, M., & Rogers, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Public engagement for public education: Joining forces to revitalize democracy and equalize schools.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

7. Johnson, J., Rochkind, J., Remaley, M. & Hess, J. (2011). *What's trust got to do with it?* New York: Public Agenda. Retrieved from http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/WHATS_TRUST_GOT_TO_DO_WITH_IT.pdf

8. For additional information, see our slide deck presentation titled *Fixing failing schools: Building family and community demand for dramatic change,* available online at: http://www.publicimpact.com/images/stories/building_demand_for_change_in_failing_schools-Public_Impact.pdf

9. For more detail on the school improvement and engagement efforts in Denver and Chicago, see: Sperry, S., Vital, K. & Sepe, C. (2012, March). *Better schools through better politics: The human side of portfolio school district reform.* Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from: http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/WP_PSDP_SchoolClosures_Feb12.pdf.

10. Jeynes, W. J. (2005, December). *Parental involvement and student achievement: A meta-analysis.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from: http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/parental-involvement-and-student-achievement-a-meta-analysis. Weiss, H.B., Lopez, M.E., & Rosenberg, H. (2010). *Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from: http://www.nationalpirc.org/engagement_forum/beyond_random_acts.pdf

11. Snyder, C. R. (2003). *Psychology of hope: You can get there from here.* New York: Free Press.

12. Beer, M. & Nohria, N. (2000). *Breaking the code of change.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press. For more on what to do when initial efforts fail, see: Hassel, E. A., & Hassel, B. H. (2009, August). *Fixing Failing Schools: Try, Try Again.* Chapel Hill, NC: Authors. Retrieved from: http://publicimpact.com/publications/Public_Impact_Try_Try_Again_Slide_August_2009.pdf.

13. Ransom, L. (2011, May 11). "Brizard: I am in for the long haul." *Chicago Defender.* Retrieved from http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-10822-brizard-i-am-in-for-.html