

# EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

## High-Performance Schools

**How urban districts can transform themselves using business models.**

By John Simmons



—Steve Dininno

The failure of large urban school systems to educate students is achingly familiar to anyone who has followed the plight of public education in this country.

“The typical child in the typical school—especially the poor child of color in the urban school—lives in an educational environment of deep and pathological incoherence and ineffectiveness,” Harvard University professor Richard F. Elmore has written.

This perennial story is unfortunate and strangely ironic. Why? Because we know how to transform organizations and make them more successful—we just need leaders who want to apply what we already know.

A small number of school districts in the United States and Canada are showing how major transformation can happen without having to reinvent the wheel in urban schools: We need to focus on implementing practical principles, strategies, and processes for large-scale transformation.

Business leaders around the world have deepened our understanding about how to improve large, complex systems. Inspired by seminal works like Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and W. Edwards Deming’s *Out of the Crisis*, they have focused on principles that promote more effective leadership models, ranging from union-management collaboration and stronger teamwork to faster problem-solving and fewer levels of management.

These ideas are not new. Kuhn introduced the concept of “paradigm shift” in 1962 to describe the dramatic improvement in results when organizations change basic assumptions. Deming and his Japanese colleagues pioneered the development and application of continuous quality improvement in the 1950s. Contributions from Richard Beckhard, Eric Trist, and others have also guided the redesign of large organizations to improve results.

And several well-known corporate CEOs, such as Robert Galvin at Motorola, Donald Petersen at Ford, and Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines, have taken these ideas and transformed their companies.

The connection between these transformations and what needs to happen in our schools is obvious: High-performance business models can turn schools around.

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The school districts that have successfully transformed themselves reflect a wide range of circumstances. However, based on years of studying and consulting for large organizations, including urban school systems, I have found that there are specific organizing principles and strategies shared by the districts that are getting the best results.

First, district leaders must establish an organizational structure, a culture, and a two-way system of communication between the central office and the classroom that are consistent with high-performance strategies and practices. Second, they must simultaneously implement these three components in classrooms, principals' offices, and the district office.

Another organizing principle is basic, yet often ignored: Learn from the best. Districts should integrate knowledge about high-performance organizations, including large businesses, into transformation efforts.

Research also tells us that districts will be able to set better objectives and identify cost-effective policies and practices to accelerate student learning if they focus on four strategies:

- **Create leaders at every level.** Leadership is shared among teachers, parents, and administrators.
- **Transform the structure and culture of the district.** Districts shift paradigms and move from a top-down management model to a collaborative model, supporting solutions proposed by those closest to the problem.
- **Improve instruction.** Administrators support high-quality professional development, enabling teachers to apply more effective instructional strategies and collaborate with one another to meet the diverse needs of their students.
- **Engage parents and make funding adequate and equitable.** Strong partnerships with parents and equitable funding are essential for accelerating and sustaining the transformation process.

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A number of districts around the country are showing how to turn schools around by applying these principles and strategies. Three good examples are Chicago, Boston, and Brazosport, Texas.

For many years, Chicago's public school system was labeled the nation's worst. Today, however, many of the city's schools demonstrate the potential of urban school reform to achieve powerful results.

In the last 15 years, nearly half of Chicago's elementary schools have improved to the point where students are scoring at or above the national average in reading on the norm-referenced Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, and math gains have been even greater.

The numbers are compelling. In 1990, 360 of Chicago's elementary schools—82 percent of all elementary schools in the system—were low-performing on the Iowa tests, with only 20 percent of students at or above the national average in reading.

This year—15 years later—181 of these schools have 49 percent of their students at or above the national average on these tests. Moreover, nearly all of these schools are in low-income neighborhoods.

What has happened? The answer is that school leaders have made a commitment to high-performance principles, including decentralized decisionmaking, accountability, high-quality support for teachers and parents, and effective leadership.

In particular, leadership changed. With state legislation passed in 1988 as a catalyst, decisionmaking power reverted to those closest to the classrooms. This was accomplished through reforms emphasizing neighborhood and parent involvement, as well as school-based authority. Elected local school councils, composed largely of parents, have been empowered to approve school budgets and priorities, and to hire, evaluate, and remove principals. In partnership with their local councils, principals of high-performing schools build talented teaching staffs, support them with high-quality professional development, and work as a team with teachers and parents.

Meanwhile, the low-performing schools often have hired or retained ineffective principals and have not supported and trained their local school councils. They have not built effective partnerships with teachers and parents, and, as a result, instruction has not improved.

In Boston, the school district has designed a long-term strategy that emphasizes broad participation in decision-making and effective leadership at every level. Its emphasis is on collaboration.

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The goal, according to Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant, is to create a system that works for individual schools and the district as a whole. "The real work of teaching and learning has to occur school by school, and you can't use a single, cookie-cutter model in every school to shape the design for improvement," says Payzant, who has been the district's superintendent since 1995. "But you have to provide a framework for schools to work within, or lots of time will be spent trying to figure out how to improve student achievement without the necessary knowledge and support for doing so."

After a school board meeting in Brazosport in 1991, a board member who also was an executive at Dow Chemical, the area's largest employer, had an insightful chat with the superintendent. "If we made the excuses in our business you guys make in your business," the executive said, "we'd be flat broke and closing up shop in a year. You need to stop making excuses and find a way to teach these children."

Then-superintendent Jerry Anderson listened—and then took his leadership team to a workshop on transforming organizations that Dow offered to its employees. In time, the district's leaders came up with a plan for change that incorporated Deming's 14 points for effective leadership and redesign.

This decentralizing strategy emphasized examining data and studying what teachers with successful students were doing in their classrooms. The research revealed that several teachers had developed similar and effective "dynamic processes for continuous assessment and reteaching." The leaders disseminated these processes, and thereby accelerated the quality of teaching across their district.

By 1998, more than 90 percent of the children in this 41 percent low-income district scored better than 90 percent on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Some have called Brazosport the first district in the country to close the achievement gap between minority and white students.

One element of success common to all of these districts is a focus on improving—and supporting—instruction. Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond, who has written extensively about the redesign of urban schools, calls this fundamental. Since children are required by law to attend school,

she argues, “the public education system ought to be able to guarantee that every child is taught by someone who is knowledgeable, competent, and caring.”

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In the past 40 years, hundreds of studies have documented processes for transforming large organizations. Based on my own research in this field and experience working with large businesses and school districts, I define three phases that capture the process for transforming complex systems: *readiness* (preparing organizational leadership to lead change); *redesign* (developing action plans within and across departments and schools); and *implement and improve* (encouraging continuous improvement of results).

These three phases should come together in a deliberate, step-by-step plan for launching and sustaining improvement efforts that combine high-performance concepts to enhance leadership, improve instruction, engage parents, and transform a district’s culture.

The ultimate goal is to help school districts work as effective organizations. This has begun to happen, but needs to do so on a much broader scale. If more districts and schools adopt a high-performance model for change, we can have a different discussion about how urban school systems are faring in this country—a discussion that is not about failure, but transformation.

*John Simmons is the president of Strategic Learning Initiatives, a nonprofit organization based in Chicago. This essay is based on his forthcoming book, Breaking Through: Transforming Urban School Districts, to be published in January by Teachers College Press.*