HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

Challenge, Support, Alignment, and Choice

BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*

JUNE 2005

Executive Summary

Ten years after most states adopted educational standards, there are few if any districts of any size that enable their students to reach those standards. However, there are signs of progress. Early leader states, including North Carolina and Texas, pioneered the use of disaggregated achievement data. District 2 in New York City gave us a sophisticated understanding of the role of instructional leadership. Dozens of urban districts followed with varying models of an aligned instructional system—a common curriculum with aligned assessments, a district-wide conception of quality instruction, principals as instructional leaders, instructional coaches, job-embedded continuous professional development for teachers, and the use of achievement data to drive continuous improvement—resulting in moderately strong improvement in elementary literacy.

At the secondary level, there are fewer signs of progress. A handful of districts have improved achievement and college preparation rates, and others have increased graduation rates, but few have done both. Kansas City, Kansas is one of the few districts to have improved both its achievement and attainment (i.e., promotion, graduation, postsecondary enrollment) with a district-wide approach to secondary school redesign. Another positive development at the secondary level has been the development of charter schools throughout the nation over the past decade, which has provided a laboratory in which a handful of successful and occasionally innovative school designs have been produced. The rise of charter schools has also provided some evidence that the demand for quality options is high.

In light of the work of the last decade, we can draw four important conclusions:

- A well-executed and sustained strategy of an aligned instructional system can produce moderately strong improvement in achievement and can serve most K–8 students well.

- It's very difficult to make dramatic improvements in struggling secondary schools, but reform models that incorporate rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, and strong student supports produce promising results with sustained district support.

- It's easier to start a good new school than fix a bad one, but there are obviously political, financial, and logistical limits to this strategy.

- School choice appears to be of interest to many teachers, parents, and students, particularly as teens become aware of their strengths, interests, and career direction.

These conclusions represent potentially conflicting choices: a managed system of schools or a system of public school choice; school improvement or replacement; internal or external capacity. Strategies deployed in New York, Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Kansas City, among others, lead us to believe that these ideas can, in fact must, be harmonized in a portfolio of schools that builds on the benefits of an aligned instructional system while taking advantage of the benefits of school choice, particularly at the secondary level.

The common challenge, from the classroom to the state house, is to build a much more productive educational system—a transformation requiring an environment of high challenge and high support. This paper identifies four components that define the challenge, and four components that build the capacity for success. These eight components are tailored to a portfolio strategy—a theory of action that ensures a supply of quality school options that reflects a community's needs, interests, and assets. At the heart of that strategy is the goal of ensuring that every student has access to high-quality schools that prepare them for further learning, work, and citizenship. Blending challenge, support, alignment, and choice requires a new compact between the district and its stakeholders—a culture that values measurement, performance, competition, efficiency, and innovation. Because this is a design and execution challenge heavily influenced by context, districts seeking to become "high performing" require and encourage adult learning at every level.

By "high performing," we mean high achievement levels and high graduation rates for all groups of students. Metrics should also include early indicators such as attendance and promotion rates. While more difficult to measure, high-performing districts would also have high rates of postsecondary enrollment and completion, employment, and voter participation. High-performing systems are responsive, transparent, and efficient; they track and report to stakeholders progress on a "dashboard" of indicators of success on a regular basis.

There are frustratingly few people studying what is certainly one of America's most pressing challenges—educational success at scale. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is one of the few centers devoted to creating what it calls "smart districts." The Center for Reinventing Public Education is a leader on equitable school choice. And Michael Fullan has devoted the last decade to studying leadership of educational systems. In this paper, we attempt to build on their work and, where possible, be more specific about how to combine accountability and capacity, alignment and choice, and secondary school improvement and new school development. Most of our partnerships are with large urban districts, and it is our hope that the ideas presented here benefit them and others as well.

Creating a High-Performing System

The goal of ensuring all students achieve at high levels set by the national report, *A Nation at Risk*, is now two decades old. While the nation has made slow but steady progress in elementary literacy, secondary achievement levels, graduation rates, and college completion rates remain largely stagnant. There are hundreds of high schools around the country that are helping most of their students achieve at high levels, but they remain largely random examples of innovation and heroic leadership. Few, if any, public school districts have achieved uniformly high performance and attainment levels, particularly in the upper grades.

The most important challenge in America today is to create systems of schools that work for all students, particularly low-income and historically underserved groups. This is an extraordinarily difficult and complex challenge. New system leaders inherit layers of local, state, and federal regulations; restrictive employment agreements; antiquated management systems; and, perhaps most damaging, a culture of differential expectations, compliance, or helplessness. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has had the opportunity to work with experts across this country and internationally,[1] and hundreds of schools and school districts. Based on these experiences, we have identified districts and schools that have made some progress toward this 21st century challenge. Among those organizations, a set of best practices has begun to emerge. (See Exhibit 1, Page 5.)

FIGURE 1 : **APPROACHES TO REFORM**

Source: Michael Barber, 2003

Observed best practices reflect a reform strategy that balances high challenge with high support.[2] (See Figure 1.) Historically, we've expected too little of our communities, our education professionals, and our students. Recently, we've expected too much with too little support. Maintaining a delicate balance between challenge and support is central to effective classroom, school, and district leadership.

---

[1] Our views draw heavily from the work of Paul Hill, Warren Simmons, Michael Barber, Michael Fullan, Don McAdams, Kim Smith, Michael Cohen, and Hilary Pennington.

[2] This framework has been drawn heavily from the work of Michael Barber, a key education advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair of the U.K., and Michael Fullan. Both have suggested that an effective district reform strategy is one that balances "high challenge with high support."

Exhibit 1: Emerging Best Practices

	Attribute	Typical Observation	Emerging Best Practice
High Challenge	Organizational mission	Multiple missions that result in low-income/minority students trapped in low-expectation tracks	Common standards that prepare all students for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship
	Governance	Complex, dysfunctional structures involving multiple entities with overlapping responsibilities, bureaucracy, legacy contracts, and interest group control	Stable, effective local governance focused on results and equity[3] empowering improvement with transparency, measurement, and responsiveness, as well as alignment with state goals and policies
	Accountability framework	Some student accountability; de minimus staff, school, or system accountability; limited or lagging indicators of performance	Transparent performance management system with steps of progressive intervention that provides support for all—students, staff, school, and system—and is relevant to the challenge
	Community support	No real community support networks—resulting in disenfranchisement, learned helplessness, and white flight	Proactive strategies to engage parents, citizens, and business and civic leaders—resulting in an informed community that makes quality education a priority
Theory of Action	School portfolio	Large attendance-area schools; comprehensive secondary schools that track students by perceived ability	Choice system that allows parents, students, and teachers to select from several quality school options designed to engage all students effectively; implements location and transportation policies, enrollment policies, hiring practices, and outreach efforts that ensure equitable choice; has outside assistance providers and operators to augment capacity
High Support	Curriculum support	Textbook adoptions as curriculum; test scores as primary student outcomes; test preparation as instructional focus	Learning expectations that provide a spine for instructional materials, diagnostic assessments, ramp-up supports for students, and teacher development activities
	School support	Operational compliance; isolation; centralized, compartmentalized budgets; low-quality, unresponsive, and unaligned standardized services	Strong learning and support networks for schools; dollars that follow students and reflect student needs, creating budgets that allow school-based decision making; effective core services provided; optional purchased services available
	Teacher support	Late, centralized recruiting; placement by seniority; common pay scale; isolation with large student loads; no induction; random workshops; self-identified leaders	Instructional leaders identified and developed; district recruiting; school/network-based hiring; three-year induction with ongoing, job-embedded development in a professional learning community; compensation that reflects ability, performance, and responsibility
	Student support	Anonymous students; limited academic support or guidance; no connection to community services; class grades unrelated to standards; classroom work not aligned to standardized tests	An advocate for every student who ensures appropriate guidance and academic support and connection to family services; frequent and specific performance feedback against clear expectations for every student

---

[3] *School Communities that Work.* Annenberg Institute for School Reform. (2002)

Districts demonstrating improved results typically have a clearly defined improvement strategy, or more accurately, a collection of improvement strategies that constitute a theory of action. In many urban districts, these improvement strategies effectively combine the benefits of an aligned system with quality options—in other words, an aligned instructional system *and* school choice. Figure 2 shows the organizing framework for this paper: a system that combines high-challenge and high-support attributes around a theory of action. Michael Barber and Michael Fullan summarize it as the need to "integrate accountability and capacity-building, and do it systemically."[4] The emerging best practices are targeted at school districts, but many would equally apply to state policy. It's critical that district and state policies be aligned to provide consistent signals and coherent support to schools.

FIGURE 2: **A HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICT**

HIGH CHALLENGE
- College-ready mission
- Effective governance
- Strong accountability
- Community engagement

THEORY OF ACTION:
Portfolio Strategy

HIGH SUPPORT
- Curriculum support
- Teacher support
- School support
- Student & Family support

I. High Challenge

More than anything else, real people in real companies want to be part of a winning team. They want to contribute to producing real results. They want to feel the excitement and the satisfaction of being part of something that just flat-out works. When people begin to feel the magic of momentum—when they begin to see tangible results and can feel the flywheel start to build speed—that's when they line up, throw their shoulders to the wheel, and push.
   – Jim Collins, From Good to Great

Whether in a business setting or a classroom, consistently high expectations yield higher levels of engagement and better results. School districts create a high-challenge environment with a college-ready mission, effective governance, strong accountability, and community engagement.

1. **College-ready mission.** In some fashion, every community should express its aspirations for its young people, creating what Michael Fullan calls a "moral purpose" for its schools. For the last century, our school systems, and particularly our high schools, have operated with multiple missions—preparing some students for elite universities and some for skilled labor, while pushing others out. As Achieve and numerous economists have pointed out, we've reached a point where knowledge and skill requirements for further education, work, and citizenship have converged. This need to educate nearly all students to high levels is the foundational assumption of the 15-year-old standards movement, but in most states and districts, the exit expectations are still closer to ninth grade than college ready. Adopting a college- and work-ready mission has three specific implications:

---

[4] Barber, M. and Fullan, M. Tri-Level Development: Putting Systems Thinking Into Action. *Education Week.* (March 2, 2005)

o **Standards and assessments:** High school standards for math, reading, and writing should prepare students to pass a community college placement exam at the least.[5] Aligned assessments should include diagnostics to support personalization, demonstrations to prove mastery, and state tests to audit school quality. All assessments, including high-stakes assessments, should allow multiple methods of demonstrating mastery.

o **Curriculum and graduation requirements:** College-ready courses of study should be the default for every student to ensure access to further learning. Career-focused courses of study should be aligned with industry standards, as well as college readiness.

o **Waiver process:** A waiver process should be created for schools with an alternative curriculum or a competency-based approach.

Ideally (and eventually) these will be state as well as district policies, but districts should not wait for states to lift their expectations. Instead, districts should hold community conversations to build consensus around a new unifying mission for public schools.

> **San Jose Unified School District: A Focus on Making All Students College Ready**
>
> In 1991, San Jose joined Equity 2000, a project launched by the College Board to support the academic development of traditionally underserved districts. The project focuses on high achievement for all students by eliminating dead-end tracking; supporting teacher, counselor, and principal development; and engaging parents and the community. Based in part on this experience, the school board increased graduation requirements in 1998 to include an additional year of science, math, and foreign language. A series of "community conversations" helped the district gain support for its mission among key stakeholders. The results are impressive. High school reading and math scores have improved, the achievement gap has decreased, and the percentage of graduates who satisfy college entrance requirements has increased from 40 percent to 65 percent.
>
> *Sources: Education Trust-West, San Jose Unified School District, College Board*

2. **Effective governance.** In order to execute a deliberate strategy, it is critical that there is a stable and effective governance structure that is accountable to its citizens and the students it serves. This should include a clear set of roles and responsibilities for each of the key actors in the system:

o **School boards** should set a clear vision and mission for the district and focus on systemwide policy and results rather than operations. Their responsibilities should include hiring a chief executive, adopting improvement goals and policies in support of the mission, monitoring student and school performance relative to the goals, and providing financial oversight. Strategies and actions should set the tone for a culture of data-driven decision making. In some large urban areas, mayoral control has proven to be an effective and stable alternative to elected school boards.

---

[5] Achieve's American Diploma Project suggests math competency through Algebra II and a basic understanding of probability and statistics. For a more complete description of the skills required for high school graduates, whether they are attending college or directly entering the workforce, see *Ready or Not.* DC: Achieve, Inc. (2004) at www.achieve.org.

o **District leaders** should work in close coordination with the school board/mayor to fulfill the district's mission. This includes joint development of a theory of action, oversight of schools and contractors, and building effective data and reporting systems that provide the board and community with up-to-date and accurate data and information about school and student performance. District leaders must also have the power to improve struggling schools, replace failing schools, and develop the organizational capacity to execute this charge effectively and equitably.

o **School leaders** should have primary responsibility for improving overall student achievement and attainment. In support of this goal, principals/leadership teams should have responsibility for hiring and evaluating school staff and overseeing school and budget management functions. This will vary by type of school—district, contract, or charter. In some cases, particularly in the case of low performance, this responsibility may reside with a network leader.

o **Employee groups** are major actors in district governance, since about 80 percent of expenditures go toward salaries and benefits. Ratcheting accountability and budget pressure have made most urban union-board relationships more antagonistic than ever. The path forward is a performance compact—conditions, cultures, and contracts that promote adult learning, student achievement, efficiency, and community responsiveness.

3. **Strong accountability.** Many state and district accountability systems have held students accountable for learning without holding schools and staff members accountable for performance. To improve the fundamental effectiveness, fairness, and legal defensibility of the accountability system, districts must strive to implement an aligned system that holds schools and staff members accountable for performance. This includes three essential components:

o **An assessment policy** that systematically gauges school *and* student performance, including the development of (1) a core set of curriculum-embedded, formative, and summative assessments; (2) other demonstrations of student learning (at least at gateway grades such as sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th), including projects and research papers to measure student progress and make standards tangible to students and teachers; and (3) measures of attainment, including grade-to-grade promotion, cohort graduation rates, and postsecondary enrollment

o **School report cards** that measure absolute student performance and year-to-year improvement; attendance, promotion and graduation rates; and safety and satisfaction

o **A policy of progressive intervention** based on performance cited in the annual report cards, including more autonomy for high-performing schools, targeted assistance for schools with particular challenges, prescriptive assistance for low-performing schools, and a redesign or closure strategy for chronically low-performing schools

4. **Community engagement.** In most communities, adopting a college-ready mission will be made possible through extended dialogue with and engagement of the community. Business, civic, and higher education leaders should be enlisted to help make the case for *all students ready for college, work, and citizenship* to parents, students, and teachers. The development

of a deliberate strategy should increase opportunities for community engagement and support. However, controversial elements of the plan, including school closure or replacement, the uneven pace of improvement, and new school development, will create short-term winners and losers, leading to dissatisfaction and controversy. System leaders will need to make a compelling case for change and frequently communicate the systemwide vision and plan so that it's clear that all students will benefit. For sustainability, system leaders will need to make a commitment to "informed community accountability." Specifically, most communities need to learn how to evaluate schools, what interventions are appropriate at each level of performance, and how they can be involved in integration of student/family support services, school improvement, and new school development.

As Barber and Fullan have pointed out, most states have focused reform efforts on increasing the level of challenge—standards, assessment, and accountability—without a commensurate focus on capacity building. We believe that, in addition to the need to strengthen each of the areas outlined above, the marginal improvement experienced in the last 10 years is largely due to a lack of capacity and an incomplete theory of action.

II. Theory of Action: A Portfolio Strategy Combining an Aligned System with Quality Options

Human beings must design action to achieve results they intend.
> *– Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*

A theory of action for school districts is a collection of strategies that reflect a conscious choice about the type and quality of schools needed in a community. Most superintendents lead their districts through some kind of periodic planning process that identifies improvement strategies and tactics given a set of inherited circumstances. Often, though, these plans are not part of a deliberate theory of action. Instead, they evolve in a nonsystematic way, often due to the urgent daily realities of leading a school district. The result is the creation of pockets of success that are not part of a larger system that serves all students well. For example, in many of the nation's urban districts, options are being developed that are not part of a larger strategy, and ultimately serve to weaken rather than strengthen the district.

Key Inputs to a Theory of Action

An effective process for developing a district-wide theory of action includes thoughtful discussions around a set of ideas driving key educational and organizational assumptions, such as:

o **A theory of education:** A shared conception of how children and adults learn

o **A theory of organization:** A shared conception of how large public delivery systems meet diverse needs

o **A theory of change:** A shared conception of how complex organizations change

The process must also consider the community in which the change will occur:

o **Current performance level:** How well are students being served? By school, region, socioeconomic status, and race?

o **Student needs:** Is there a sufficient number of schools designed to meet the needs of the entire potential student population? Does this include students with a variety of special needs (e.g., special education, recent immigrants, etc.)?

o **Community and district capacity:** What resources exist in the district and community to support school improvement and new school development?

o **Community opinion:** What level of school choice exists? What are parents' and civic leaders' views on school choice?

Our recommended theory of action—a portfolio strategy that combines an aligned instructional system with options—has been shaped by diverse inputs: improvement at the elementary level driven by aligned systems of managed instruction; the high achievement and attainment of some charter schools; and the design of charter management organizations, which have the unique opportunity to design a system from scratch. Many district leaders believe an aligned instructional system and school choice to be mutually exclusive. Our experience suggests that the two can be highly complementary. Alone, both strategies have strengths and weaknesses: aligned instruction can yield student outcome gains at elementary levels but reduce responsiveness and satisfaction; school choice can expand the supply of quality schools but produce variable quality and exacerbate existing inequities. Combined, the strengths of two seemingly contradictory approaches overcome many of these deficiencies to comprise a powerful theory of action for any school district.

Aligned instructional system. With the introduction of state standards, instructional supervision became a priority in many districts. A new version of the "one best system" emerged (the most frequently cited versions being Tony Alvarado's work in District 2 in New York and then San Diego) with four aligned core elements:

o Common curriculum and instructional materials

o Assessments aligned with standards and curriculum

o Performance management practices based on outcome data

o Instructional leaders and coaches who reinforce a shared pedagogy

o Aligned and embedded professional development[6]

Implemented in some fashion in many urban districts, this focus on curriculum and quality instruction resulted in a broader range of elementary-age students learning at high levels.[7][8] There have been smaller gains at the secondary

---

Los Angeles: Achieving Elementary Gains Using an Aligned System of Instruction

Like most urban districts, Los Angeles faces low high school achievement levels and low graduation rates. Yet the district has developed a managed instruction strategy—combining a common curriculum with aligned assessments with a district-wide understanding of quality instruction—that is showing strong indications of success.

As part of this approach, elementary schools in Los Angeles teach reading through the phonics-based Open Court reading program, which supports teachers with highly scripted lessons. The district's literacy and math coaches help train teachers to use diagnostic testing to monitor students' progress and refine instruction. Teachers and administrators throughout the district have been trained in the "Principles of Learning."

In the last several years, the district's test scores in reading and math rose above national levels, and the improvement rate on some tests has been twice that of the average for California's schools.

Sources: Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles Times

---

[6] See *The THEMES of The Best Practice Framework* from the The National Center for Educational Accountability in Appendix 1.

[7] Elmore, R.F. *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. DC: Albert Shanker Institute. (2000)

[8]*Beating the Odds IV: A City-By-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*. DC: Council of the Great City Schools. (2004)

level, which we suspect is a function of political and technical difficulty as well as effectiveness.[9] An aligned system of schools serving attendance areas has the additional benefit of uniform service to mobile populations.

Despite student gains, this approach appears to have three weaknesses:

o   It ignores that students have a variety of needs and interests and thus are unlikely to be well served or engaged by a one-size-fits-all model.

o   It will not be well received by some teachers and parents, especially without a complementary engagement strategy.

o   It limits opportunities for breakthrough performance by limiting diversity and opportunities for innovation.

"Unfettered/unregulated" school choice. In the last decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the use of choice strategies by urban districts around the country. Choice has become a compelling strategy for parents, civic leaders, and educational leaders for several reasons:

o   **Moral and civil rights:** Education is a cornerstone of equal opportunity. Equity requires that all parents be able to choose among diverse, high-quality, publicly financed educational options for their children.

o   **Student needs and teacher desires:** Children have a variety of needs, interests, and learning styles and require a variety of options to allow them to realize their dreams. Teachers also have a variety of preferred teaching styles and professional interests, and deserve options that allow them to find their optimal work environment.

o   **Parent and community empowerment:** Providing options joins parental/student choice with society's interest in improving the quality of education.

> **Milwaukee: Unfettered Choice**
>
> In most districts, students are assigned automatically to the nearest school. In Milwaukee, young people and their families can choose from any school in the district, including traditional neighborhood schools, specialty (magnet) schools, and new small schools, as well as one of the nearly 50 charter schools. In addition, some students can elect to attend a school in any of the 23 nearby suburban districts, which participate in the Chapter 220 voluntary transfer program. Finally, students from low-income families can join the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program and attend any participating private school at no charge. Currently, 115 private schools participate in the School Choice program and nearly 14,000 Milwaukee students attend choice schools.
>
> While there is some concern that the choice system has led to increased inconsistencies in school quality and has overwhelmed parents, others have suggested that the competition has forced the school district to improve. Superintendent Bill Andrekopoulis has said that school choice "has raised the bar for educators in Milwaukee to provide a good product or know that parents will simply walk."
>
> *Sources: Milwaukee Public Schools, New York Post*

---

[9] Smaller gains at the secondary level are likely a function of political and technical difficulty (there are few district-wide examples of rigorous, coherent 9-12 core curricula) and effectiveness (a single approach is less likely to work with all adolescents and young adults who are forming opinions, have varying degrees of preparation, are recognizing unique gifts and needs, and are setting life directions).

o **Systemic improvement and capacity expansion:** The combination of public accountability and parental/student choice with educational diversity should be a lever for broader systemic improvement.

A handful of districts have employed an approach that creates a system of "unfettered" choice facilitated by charters (e.g., Dayton, Ohio, or Washington, D.C.), vouchers (e.g., Cleveland, Ohio, or Milwaukee, Wisconsin), or decentralization (e.g., Edmonton, Canada). In its purest form, as advocated by Milton Friedman, Chubb and Moe, and Ted Sizer, an unfettered system of choice would be idiosyncratic and market driven. Students and their families select the school that best fits their academic and social preferences. Paul Hill has suggested a system of managed choices where a community board ensures that all students have access to a variety of quality options.[10] Most charter school advocates today accept the requirement that state-funded schools operate within the state's standards, assessments, and accountability system.

While there are few examples of a full system of choice, experience to date suggests several fundamental weaknesses with an unfettered choice strategy:

o There is a low likelihood of scaling a robust supply of high-performing schools through one-off school development. There are likely to be some high-caliber model schools juxtaposed with many others that are struggling both academically and financially.

o It appears difficult to scale a choice system equitably district wide. Given that local communities need access to capital and resources to create good schools, a system of choice grounded in pure market mechanisms is not likely to ensure consistent access to high-quality schools.[11]

o It fails to address inherent challenges of highly mobile families. With less standardization in the curriculum, switching schools comes at a higher cost.

o It requires districts to ensure that *all* families—especially those families that are less engaged—have access to information and education to enable informed choice and community accountability.

o It requires significant changes to the district governance and management model.

A portfolio strategy. Given the strengths and limitations of alignment and choice, a growing number of communities are using a combination of both strategies to create a portfolio of options of consistent high quality. In some cases, school choice is being expanded by the community in spite of district resistance. A portfolio strategy combines an aligned instructional system in district-operated schools with quality options, particularly at the secondary level, that are aligned with the mission and internally coherent but operate with greater autonomy or are independently operated (i.e., contract or charter schools).

---

[10] Hill, P. *It Takes a City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform*. Brookings Institution Press. (2000)

[11] For more information on the implications of choice on equity, see the National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education, 2003.

A district should adopt a portfolio strategy that reflects the community's needs, interests, and assets. Districts may adopt a mixed strategy with common elementary schools and schools of choice at the high school level.[12]

As districts review their strategy options, performance levels, and capacity, most are likely to discover that a majority of students, especially at the elementary level, can be well served by a thoughtful, coherent school design and instructional program complemented by the necessary safety nets and recovery systems. In fact, student and staff mobility, as well as staff and systemic support capacity, will lean heavily towards standardization as opposed to diversity. Most systems will also find that significant numbers of their students, especially secondary school students, are being poorly served due to a tracked curriculum, a mismatch of instructional strategies, a failure to capture interest and establish relevance, and limited guidance and support.

Developing an aligned system with options usually involves three core strategies:

o **Develop a default school design:** Districts should develop a "default school design" at each level and an internal management structure to serve a large percentage of students.[13] School designs should incorporate standards, curriculum, assessments, personalization and support strategies, size and configuration, scheduling, staffing, and professional development. A large system may want to identify design options at some levels or in some of these categories, but the intent is to create a fully aligned instructional system that incorporates most of the K–8 schools and a significant number of the high schools.[14] Default high school designs will have a constrained and rigorous curriculum with strong support systems.[15]

> **Philadelphia: Aligned Instruction and Use of Outside Operators Combine for Gains**
>
> Philadelphia's district-wide improvement strategy has effectively combined an aligned instructional system, the use of outside operators, and choice.
>
> In 2002, the School Reform Commission, which governs the School District of Philadelphia as part of a city-state partnership, gave operating control of 70 low-performing schools to education management organizations (EMOs) and community groups. Today, six companies (including for-profit companies) run 45 schools, and the district reconstituted an additional 25 schools, with some becoming charters.
>
> Recently, there have been some encouraging signs of progress. The district tripled the number of schools meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP), including 23 of the 45 EMO schools. In addition, reading and math scores went up, and the percentage of students scoring below basic levels in these subjects declined. Gains were similar for regular district schools, restructured schools, and EMO schools.
>
> *Sources: School District of Philadelphia, Philadelphia Inquirer*

---

[12] Denmark is a mature example of a portfolio of upper secondary options. Neighborhood P–9 schools share a national curriculum. Upper secondary choices include traditional schools, applied learning schools that focus on math/science or business/finance, vocational programs that prepare students for work *and* further education, and alternative schools.

[13] Most medium-large urban districts should be able to serve 70 percent to 80 percent of K–8 students and 50 percent to 60 percent of high school students in district-operated schools, depending on current performance levels and capacity for improvement. The remaining students would be served in autonomous or independently operated schools.

[14] Many urban districts are eliminating middle schools by converting them to K–8 or 6–12 schools. To the extent that large struggling middle schools exist, they will need to be redesigned or replaced as well.

[15] Examples include KIPP, College Board Schools, Aspire.

o **Create new schools to replace failing schools and expand the diversity of school types:**[16] New school development should target underserved neighborhoods or groups and/or replace low-capacity and low-performing schools. There are a great variety of schools with high graduation and college attendance rates. To determine the appropriate mix of schools for a particular district, school types can be grouped into general categories to foster discussion about the range of school choices that should be available to all students: traditional academic schools organized around disciplines; schools rich with projects and experiences related to a theme; and highly supportive, student-centered schools that design their programs to match the strengths, needs, and interests of their students.[17]

Best practice scaling strategies suggest that schools should be developed in like-minded networks—either franchise or managed networks—to bring additional management capacity and expertise, as well as proven programs, professional development, and additional human and financial resources.[18] A franchise network replicates a specific school model and provides strong support systems (e.g., KIPP, The Big Picture Company, New Tech High). A managed network operates schools (e.g., Aspire, Green Dot).

> **Boston: A Portfolio Strategy in Action**
>
> During the past few years, Boston Public Schools (BPS) has launched a portfolio strategy framework: managed instruction strategies—primarily at the lower grades—complemented by a network of small high schools, including pilot schools, Horace Mann charter schools (schools chartered by the state), newer small schools, and larger schools organized in small learning communities. Each high school offers courses in the basic subjects, plus special courses and themes to make each school unique.
>
> Early results are promising. Between 1998 and 2004, the percentage of students passing the ninth grade state exam (MCAS) rose from 25 percent to 74 percent. Pilot schools are attracting a student population that is generally representative of BPS students as a whole, yet pilot school students outperform other students on key measurements, including retention rates, graduation rates, and college-going rates.
>
> *Sources: Boston Public Schools, Center for Collaborative Education (CCE)*

o **Redesign comprehensive high schools:** Nearly all urban systems will need to build their internal school improvement capacity *and* utilize an external partner—either a model provider like First Things First (IRRE), Talent Development, and High Schools That Work, or a technical assistance provider that supports a district-developed school model. The amount of outside help needed will likely be a function of the size of the district, the performance distribution of the schools, and the efficiency and expertise of central office

---

[16] In addition to multiple models, districts (and states) should provide multiple pathways to and through higher education. All students should have the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school through Advanced Placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, or dual enrollment. Early college high schools are designed to create the opportunity for high school students to graduate with up to two years of college credit and come in traditional, thematic, and student-centered variations.

[17] The district-operated default school model is likely to be in the traditional discipline-centered approach, but it may include occupationally themed academies. District schools can be augmented with interesting thematic charters that leverage community assets and provide rich applied learning environments. Even if these two content-centric approaches are widely available, there will still be at least 5 percent to 15 percent of students who require a more student-centered and supportive school environment.

[18] Given capacity and scale considerations, the larger the city, the greater the percentage of new schools housed in a network.

staff. The work should result in a rigorous and coherent curriculum, engaging instruction, and a personalized environment. These redesigned schools should provide multiple curricular and thematic options within small, aligned learning communities.

III. High Support

If we are to clarify values, build understanding and commitment to shared values, and create communities where people perceive cooperative goals and mutual respect, then we must concurrently establish the capacity of people and work teams to take on their new leadership responsibilities.
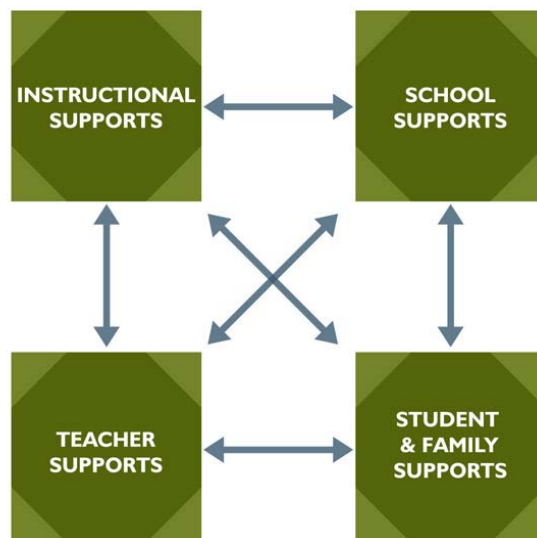*– James M. Kouzes, Barry Z. Posner, Credibility*

Creating a portfolio strategy that combines an aligned instructional system *and* expanding access to high-quality options constitutes a substantial change for the typical district. The standards are higher, the agenda is complex, the leadership roles are challenging, accountability is sharper and more transparent, and engagement is more focused. Equally important to framing the challenge is creating the support systems that ensure the success of each student, teacher, and school. This section provides an overview of the support infrastructure required to execute a portfolio strategy beginning with core learning supports, then moving to the school, teachers, and students.

1. **Instructional support.** Ten years ago, curriculum support in many school districts consisted of textbook adoption. Emerging best practices in district learning infrastructure suggested an expanded scope of instructional supports to include standards-based resources, information systems, and analytic support. While these supports will be designed for and readily available to district-operated schools, one of the major rationales for creating networks of schools is to make them available to autonomous (i.e., contract and charter) schools as well.

   FIGURE 3: **A NETWORK OF HIGH SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS, TEACHERS, & STUDENTS**

   INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORTS — SCHOOL SUPPORTS — TEACHER SUPPORTS — STUDENT & FAMILY SUPPORTS

   o **Standards-based resources:** Learning supports should provide a curricular spine linked to state standards, including:

     ➤ Grade-level expectations with examples of quality work

     ➤ Diagnostic assessments, sample problems, and writing prompts

     ➤ Sample lessons and instructional strategies

     ➤ Adopted and supplementary instructional materials and standards-based digital content

> ➢ Professional development activities

> ➢ Strategies for remediation/acceleration and meeting other special needs

Most large districts are building their own Web-based instructional resources, but as states build school improvement capacity, it's likely that many will expand Web-based instructional resources linked to state standards. Given how rapidly this nascent area is developing, districts should set clear priorities (i.e., literacy), borrow rather than develop where possible, and focus on alignment of district support services.

o **Information systems and analytical supports:** Teachers should be able to assess student performance, tailor instruction to individual needs, and monitor growth over time through a mix of classroom-based and standardized assessments.[19] Providing this information to teachers requires:

> ➢ Assessment data (formative and summative) with analytic tools that disaggregate skill sets and student groups (Increasingly, assessments are available online, which makes results available much more quickly and less expensively.)

> ➢ A student information system with a statewide, unique student identifier and common data fields so that student records can be shared from grade to grade and school to school when a student moves

> ➢ Instructional management systems that help teachers bring assessment data, standards, and lesson resources together in a manageable way

> ➢ Analytical support to help interpret data and use it to improve practices

2. **School support.** We've observed that good schools exhibit a high degree of coherence—everything works together for teacher and student success. Districts can support school coherence and effectiveness with differentiated management strategies:

o **Learning and support networks:** There are hundreds of high-performing, autonomous, and independent schools, and each has benefited from sustained, often idiosyncratic school leadership. However, most schools benefit from participation in a learning and support network—either as part of a school district, a replication network,[20] or a charter management organization—due to economies of information and scale, shared expertise/network learning, and common tools and resources. These networks should be designed to help ensure that every lesson taught by every teacher is part of a coherent school with aligned support systems.

With the introduction of multiple school models and a system of progressive intervention, the district can adopt several school-grouping strategies. Some contract and charter schools may participate in support networks external to the district (e.g., networks of international schools). Larger districts with numerous schools in need of significant improvement may want to group schools according to performance level to ensure that all

---

[19] Boston's MyBPS and Cleveland's application of SchoolNet are good examples.
[20] In an analysis of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's new schools grantees, schools that were part of tightly designed and supported networks performed at higher levels more consistently than their counterparts.

those who require prescriptive assistance are receiving consistent levels of support. Finally, there may be some inherent benefit in grouping schools, where possible, by location.

o **Flexible and adequate budgets:** A high-performing district requires a financing scheme that (1) recognizes each school needs funding that reflects the challenges of its student population, and (2) aligns with the system's accountability system requiring differentiated management depending on school performance—giving autonomous and high-performing schools the discretion to expend funds as they deem educationally appropriate. Districts should migrate to actual cost budgeting rather than distributing FTEs because it tends to exacerbate inequity between schools. [21]

Implementation of such a financing scheme implies earned budget autonomy, which requires extensive capacity building, including a mix of well-designed professional development opportunities centered on strategic resource allocation and financial management for school leaders. Appropriate district oversight and support of the process are also essential. Adequacy for contract and charter schools that do not receive district services would require that they receive at least 95 percent of per-pupil revenue, including debt service and a facility. With a full budget allocation, contract and charter schools should have the opportunity to purchase core services from the district or other providers.

o **Core services and interventions:** As a district continues to monitor the performance of its schools, it will be critical that it develops an approach for efficiently diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, and then tailoring an appropriate service and improvement strategy. Districts should provide high-quality core services to managed schools, including curriculum, assessment, student information systems, recruiting, finance and payroll, facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation, along with additional services available for purchase.[22]

3. **Teacher support.** Teaching quality is the key variable in student achievement. To promote quality instruction, teachers should expect deliberate support from their districts in three areas:

o **Instructional leadership:** School and district leaders should facilitate the development of a shared conception of quality instruction and provide aligned feedback and professional development. Improving student achievement through effective instructional practices should be the central focus of district and school meetings. Teacher leaders should provide frequent feedback on the quality of instruction, which may be augmented by non-evaluative coaching. Good instructional leadership makes teaching a public performance and improvement a team sport.

---

[21] Distributing dollars rather than headcount should be accompanied by a transition to a compensation system that more accurately reflects contribution (i.e., pay based on knowledge/skill, performance, and responsibility).
[22] The extent to which budgets should be school based is a contentious issue. Some aligned systems provide little school budget discretion. A recently completed district design for Oakland suggested locating more discretion with school network supervisors.

o **Professional learning community:** An effective professional learning community will promote horizontal accountability—teachers who work together to improve each other's practice.[23] To accomplish this, teachers need weekly time to work together to meet shared challenges and improve their skills. They need the opportunity to work with a group of teachers who share responsibility for the success of a group of students. They need time to work together with other teachers who teach the same subject. They need ongoing, job-embedded professional development. This may be provided by an instructional coach who has the opportunity to observe their practice, model successful practices, and provide performance feedback.

o **Professional culture and compensation:** The professional culture of a school and district—set in part by employment agreements—should reflect the values of flexibility, measurement, incentives, efficiency, and innovation. More specifically, teachers should be given the opportunity to be:

➢ Hired by schools/networks with an appropriate match of skills and supports, which requires incentives for teachers to take on challenging assignments and mentors for new teachers

➢ Compensated in a way that adequately reflects knowledge and skills, student performance, and responsibilities

➢ Provided with career development opportunities and relevant educational experiences[24]

➢ Supported by employment contracts that reflect goals, job responsibilities, and due process rights, and also offer enough flexibility to allow for school-based innovations[25]

4. **Student and family support.** The ultimate customers of any school district's offerings are the students. To ensure a diverse set of students are positioned to meet the overarching district goal of "every student graduates ready for college, work, and citizenship," a district must put in place a range of student supports appropriately tailored to the specific needs of their student population, including:

o **College awareness and guidance:** Students and their parents must be made aware of their life options after high school and the effect their decisions— academic and personal—will have on their lives.

o **Academic support:** Students need a clear understanding of what is expected of them. Schools should use a variety of strategies to make standards come alive, including feedback from aligned assessments, displaying work that reflects expectations, standards-

---

[23] Stigler, J.W. and Hiebert, J. *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom.* Free Press (1999) and Wagner, T. *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools.* Falmer Press. (2003)

[24] See New Leaders for New Schools and New York City's Leadership Academy as important case studies in understanding how to recruit, shape, and support effective school leaders.

[25] *Teacher Contracts: Restoring the Balance.* The Education Partnership. (2005)

based report cards, and portfolios. Students with specific learning needs—whether due to language or learning barriers—should have the opportunity during the school day and after to receive assistance in core subjects.

o **Student and family supports:** Districts should work with other community- and state-based organizations to align services for high-needs children and families. These may include before- and after-school care, health and mental health care, and temporary housing. Secondary students should have access to one or more alternative school options that offer an individualized approach in a highly supportive environment.

Implications for Implementation

Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs.
  – Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Districts will not be able to transform themselves into high-performing systems based on the will of the superintendent or a handful of school board members, teachers, or community leaders. Effective transformation will require key stakeholders to take an active role in the planning, execution, and oversight of the strategy. Districts will have to recognize the critical roles and responsibilities of stakeholders across the system and should design a clear, predictable process that guides the community through the transformation.

Roles and responsibilities. Because transitions are complex, contentious, and long term, stable and effective governance, community participation, and state support are critical to success. There are implications and required actions for actors and institutions across the system:

> **An Ideal State Policy Set**
>
> While much of the work to create a high-performing school district rests with district and school leaders, staff, and communities, states also play an important role in advancing policies that create the conditions required to raise graduation rates for all students. These include:
>
> o **College-ready standards:** Adopt college-ready standards in reading, writing, and math; promote college awareness; encourage the use of multiple assessments to ensure system and student performance
> o **Strong accountability:** Create an accessible, data-driven system that provides appropriate supports and intervention to struggling schools and districts
> o **Equitable choices:** Create incentives and remove barriers to creating new schools that prepare all students for college
> o **Adequate and flexible budgeting:** Link funding to the costs of meeting educational standards, and create a transparent, equitable, and stable system that reflects actual costs

o **District leadership:** Transformation will require critical policy changes. For example, weighted student budgeting and purchased services require a new approach to budgeting or a new financial system, as well as substantial improvement in school-based financial decision-making skills. School boards and/or mayors and superintendents should be prepared to address a range of key issues, including governance structures, standards, curriculum and instructional policies, community relations and school choice related policies, and financial and central services policies. These changes are likely to require outside assistance and will result in dislocation and job loss. Therefore, they will be contentious.

o **Central office:** To effectively execute critical components of the strategy, district leadership will have to determine how to redesign the central office to better support schools. For example, with a system of progressive intervention, the district requires substantial capacity for school improvement. Most districts will need to improve and expand their internal capacity to manage and improve schools (e.g. adding literacy coaches *and* school improvement coaches for prescriptive assistance requiring a change in the use of Title 1 funds, another contentious budget shift).

o **Educators:** Teachers and school leaders will need access to information to understand school models and networks in order to ensure that they are part of a school or network that best reflects their pedagogical style, education philosophy, and beliefs about teaching and learning. This, in turn, will require some changes in district policies and most collective bargaining agreements, and, more importantly, a significant culture change for the educators and the system. By teaching in a school that is part of a network, teachers will be both *challenged*—through the use of observed practice, critical feedback, and likely transparent performance data—and *well-supported*—with expanded access to instructional coaching and professional development, instructional resources, and supplemental supports for students.

o **Parents:** Parents will need to be informed consumers of school choice. Some will need to help their children take advantage of supplemental services, be more involved in their children's school choices, and work to help their children reach college-ready standards.

o **Civic and business leaders:** Community leaders must be vocal supporters of high standards and guardians of effective governance. They should help identify desirable choice options and provide relevant opportunities for students.

o **State leaders:** States should adopt college-ready standards, graduation requirements, and assessments—most likely phased in over several years. States can accelerate the development of high-quality options for urban students with strong intervention strategies, strong charter school laws, and adequate and flexible student-based finance and budgeting systems and processes.

Transformation process. While transformation planning will be highly contextual to each district, at a high level, there are four phases in the process:

FIGURE 4: **TRANSFORMATION PROCESS**

1. Deliberately develop community beliefs around the theory of education, organization, and change; understand the community context by mapping community and student opinions, assets, and needs by sub-community; and use results to draft a strategy that outlines a theory of action, including the preferred portfolio of school types

DIAGNOSTIC & MARKET MAPPING

DETAILED PLANNING

MANAGED SCHOOLS TRIAGE

PORTFOLIO & CENTRAL SUPPORT TRIAGE

MANAGED SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT

PORTFOLIO & CENTRAL SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT

2. Begin detailed planning phase that considers governance and organization, district-managed school improvement, new school development, shared services, resource allocation, and community engagement

The assistance of a consulting firm experienced in large-scale organizational change can be helpful in these first two phases.

3. Begin executing plan with implementation of key policy (standards, accountability, choice, resources) and organizational changes; initiate school closures/replacements and redesign efforts; and launch new school development with a combination of imported model providers and local development efforts

4. Begin improvement efforts in upper quartile schools; expand new school development; and complete full redesign of central office and policy changes

Ultimately, the transformation will require a reallocation of internal resources and investment of external resources. A variety of funding strategies will be required over the course of a decade to fully make the transformation.

Conclusion

... [our political processes have trouble] dealing effectively with issues that involve technical complexities, shorter-term cost to achieve longer-term gain, incomplete information and uncertain outcomes, opportunities for political advantage, and inadequate public understanding. Unfortunately, many of the most important economic, geopolitical, and environmental challenges of today's complicated world fit this profile, raising the question of how effectively our political system will be able to deal with them.
      – Robert Rubin, An Uncertain World

Robert Rubin was describing the difficulty of responding to the 1995 Mexican debt crisis, but his words ring true when applied to the challenge of creating systems of schools, particularly urban systems that work for all students. It's an enormous technical, educational, and political challenge. And yet, our democracy demands that we take it on.

Based on the successes of multiple countries, school districts, and other complex sectors, a compelling path forward has emerged. It requires educators and communities to demand that students, teachers, and communities are appropriately challenged; articulate a theory of action that is equitable, scalable, and ultimately practical; and design a system of operations that supports high performance.

The high-performing district strategy laid out here draws on the best of what works. It is a hypothesis based on the apparent necessity to combine alignment and choice, accountability and capacity building. As leading urban districts are demonstrating, we can and must combine the benefits of aligned instructional systems with the obvious benefits of and demand for school

choice. We're also suggesting that states and districts need help to meet the challenge, and that they could take advantage of the growing number of high-quality school developers, school operators, and technical assistance providers. Together, through public-private partnerships, we can meet the challenge of creating high-performing districts that prepare all students for college, work, and citizenship.

Appendix 1:

The THEMES of *The Best Practice Framework*
from the National Center for Educational Accountability
(http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/theme_explanation.cfm?sub=framework)

Curriculum and Academic Goals
"What is Taught and Learned"
This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? It is a great surprise to many that the *explicit*, *agreed-upon* academic goals of our school systems have ranged from fuzzy to nonexistent. High-performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through 12th grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for *all* students and are non-negotiable.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"
This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers must be selected and developed to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
"The Right Stuff – Time and Tools"
This theme focuses on the "things" that high-performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"
After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject, and ensuring that schools are equipped with the staff and the tools needed to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question, "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment
"Ensuring All Children Learn"
The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: "What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?" High-performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

*Various school improvement organizations and studies provide different organizational schema for describing school system practices. NCEA uses the five themes that were consistently identified in high-performing schools across the nation as the primary areas that differentiate school performance.