



URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

URBAN ADVOCATE: 2008 AWARD EDITION

2008 CUBE ANNUAL AWARD FOR URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

As America becomes an increasingly diverse nation, school systems across the country struggle with educating a large and growing percentage of students who do not speak English fluently. This challenge is particularly acute in urban school districts, which typically attract disproportionate numbers of poor newcomers to this country.

In part because of federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards, the plight of limited English students has become a point of emphasis for all school systems. The three finalists for the 2008 Council of Urban Boards of Education Annual Award for School Board Excellence all have faced this challenge head-on and all have made significant, notable progress in educating students who speak a language other than English as their native tongue.

This year's winner, the Brownsville (Texas) Independent School District is almost entirely Hispanic and overwhelmingly poor. More than 40 percent of Brownsville's students have limited proficiency in English. As a whole, these three groups often struggle to reach grade level on state assessments. But Brownsville has consistently outperformed its peer districts in almost every key measure.

The other finalists were the Chula Vista (Calif.) Elementary School District and

Omaha (Neb.) Public Schools. Like Brownsville, both Chula Vista and Omaha have large numbers of limited English speakers in their classrooms. And also like Brownsville, Chula Vista and Omaha have found ways to succeed with these students, although each of the three districts has found its own path to success.

As the urban component of the National School Boards Association, CUBE works to promote best practices that showcase excellence in school board governance. The Award for Urban School Board Excellence is presented annually to a CUBE member district and is an example of CUBE working to create opportunities for urban school boards to showcase their knowledge and skills as policy makers.

The finalists were selected by a panel of distinguished judges based on materials submitted by the school districts and on independent follow-up research. Applicants had to describe a vision for their role in governing their districts and also had to show that their board had implemented a



Pictured are the award-winning Garcia Middle School Destination Imagination Teams. The teams participated in the state competition.

strategy to narrow gaps in achievement among groups of students.

In addition, applicants had to demonstrate leadership in creating learning environments that encourage student achievement and also had to show they had strengthened community support for their districts.

The fifth annual CUBE Award for Urban School Board Excellence was presented Sept. 27 in Las Vegas at the 2008 CUBE Annual Conference.

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BROWNSVILLE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

On the border between two countries and two cultures, the Brownsville (Texas) Independent School District has quietly become a world-class school system.

Texas has been at the forefront of school reform since the 1990s, with large districts such as the Houston Independent School District (the co-winner of the 2007 CUBE Award for Urban School Board Excellence) receiving most of the attention. But the successes in Brownsville have been every bit as pro-

nounced and impressive as those in Texas' bigger districts.

Brownsville is located on the extreme southern tip of Texas, right on the U.S.-Mexico border. Nearly all of the Brownsville Independent School District's 48,000 students are Hispanic and more than 40 percent speak Spanish with limited English skills. The vast majority—95 percent—come from poor families.

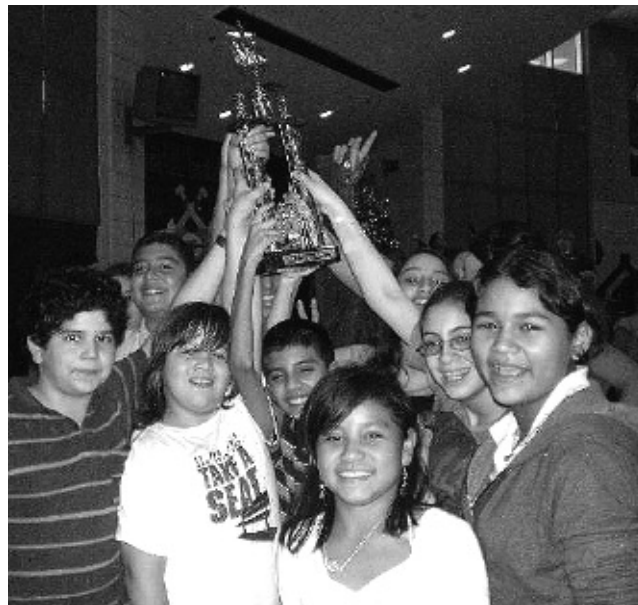
"We're in one of the poorest areas of the country, but all students can learn and we believe that," says Superintendent Hector Gonzales.

The superintendent's words are more than just a slogan. Despite the challenges the district faces, the Brownsville schools have forged a remarkable track record of success—success that can be measured.

A focus on student achievement

In the past four years, achievement gaps between Brownsville's Hispanic students and the statewide averages for white students have narrowed at all grade levels in math and at the elementary and high school levels in reading. For example, Hispanic middle school students gained 12 percentage points on the Texas state math exams compared to the averages for white students. Hispanic and low-income students in Brownsville also improved at a greater rate than their peers across Texas during the same time period.

Perhaps most importantly, these academic gains are translating into higher education opportunities for Brownsville students. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the percentage of Brownsville high school graduates entering a Texas college in the subsequent fall has increased from 51 percent to 59 percent during the past four years.



Oliveira Middle School students recently celebrated their First Place Overall win at the Lucio Middle School Academic UIL Meet. Oliveira also won First Overall at a November meet held at Garcia Middle School.

BROWNSVILLE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Brownsville Independent School District Board of Trustees:

Dr. Enrique Escobedo, President
Herman Otis Powers, Jr., Vice Pres.
Susan Galvan, Secretary
Pat Lehmann, Assistant Secretary
Rolando Aguilar
Joe Colunga
Ruben Cortez, Jr.

Governance structure:

Seven board members are elected to three-year staggered terms, with elections annually.

Superintendent of Schools:

Hector Gonzales

Student enrollment: 48,858

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 0.2%

Asian-American: 0.4%

Hispanic/Latino: 97.9%

White: 1.5%

Other: 0%

Students receiving FRL: 94.6%

Students in Special Education:

ESL/ELL students: 42.6%

Average per pupil

expenditures: \$6,693

Staff: 7,029

Website: www.bisd.us

Approximately four years ago, district officials and school board members reexamined their program and made changes to focus all of the district's efforts on improving student performance.

"We became more data-driven, using that data to focus on areas of weakness," Gonzales says.

The school board did its part, too. Board members examined the budget and made sure that as much money as possible was directed toward the classroom. The board's goal is to spend at least 65 percent of its budget directly on the classroom each year.

"Curriculum and instruction has been the number one focus of every board member," says Enrique Escobedo, president of the Brownsville Independent School District Board of Education. "We fill our needs first—the needs drive the budget."

For example, Texas requires class sizes of no more than 22 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. However, districts can apply for exemptions to this rule if they cannot fill those teaching positions.

The Brownsville ISD had applied for exemptions in the past. However, the

Brownsville school board said: “No more exemptions.” Gonzales and his staff redoubled their efforts to recruit and retain teachers. And today, 100 percent of classes in grades K-four are at 22 students or smaller.

Bilingual instruction a key

With so many students who are native Spanish speakers, it was important for Brownsville’s leaders to develop a strategy to educate English language learners. The strategy they’ve chosen—and strongly believe in—is bilingual education.

The bilingual versus English immersion debate continues in many urban districts. Some educators favor putting students in English-only classes, feeling they pick up on the language more quickly that way. Others, such as Escobedo and Gonzales, feel that students should gradually transition from one language to another. In Brownsville, limited-English students receive instruction both in English and their native Spanish for the first three years they are in school. Nearly all of the district’s kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers are certified as bilingual educators.

“You don’t stop the learning just because of a language barrier,” Gonzales says. Escobedo agrees that bilingual education works, saying, “The proof is in our results.”

Brownsville’s Mexican-American heritage is important to people in the community. In true American melting pot fashion, district officials have embraced this cultural heritage. The district and its students participate in the city’s annual Charro Days festival, which is marked with dancing, parades, and fiestas. In recent years, the schools have expanded *estudiantina* (Hispanic music) and Latino dance programs.

The district’s community support was on display in 2006, when voters approved a \$135 million bond package that will build four new schools and renovate several others. This is a particularly noteworthy statement given the widespread poverty in Brownsville.

Escobedo says this level of community support didn’t happen by accident. Instead, the board has a deliberate plan to build public support. Gonzales hosts five community meetings every year, each held in a different part of town, where he talks and listens to citizens. The board also created a citizen’s committee to oversee the district’s bond spending and



Porter High School students Alan Ponce and Anthony Frietas demonstrate a model at the International Museum of Art and Science.

construction projects.

During the budget season, Escobedo says the board provides complete, detailed information, so that members of the public can see the district’s needs and how it plans to spend its money.

“The last thing we want is for the community to think we’re being wasteful,” he says.

Success on the chessboard equals success in the classroom

Most of Brownsville’s approaches are tried-and-true, common sense educational practices: directing more resources to the classroom, using data to direct instruction, and building community support for educational needs.

But one of Brownsville’s strategies may be considered a bit unorthodox. The district uses chess as a significant learning tool.

Schools throughout the district have thriving chess teams and teachers who coach the chess squads are paid a stipend. The 2006 International Chess Federation Elementary Chess Champion is a Brownsville student and earlier this year, the Vela Middle School team placed fourth in the National Junior High Chess Tournament.

“Chess is a high priority in our district,” Gonzales says. He said research has shown that participating in chess stimulates critical thinking skills that



Cummings Middle School sixth-grader Beyra Almanza, who won Overall Grand Champion in individual projects at the Rio Grande Valley Regional Science Fair in March 2008.

help students in their classes.

Beyond that, Escobedo says, “Chess is a lot of fun. The kids love it.” Competing in chess makes students more enthusiastic about coming to school.

More work to be done

Despite the gains, more work remains to be done—and Brownsville’s leaders are committed to doing it.

Brownsville’s high school dropout rate currently stands at around 14 percent. Gonzales says that’s too high and that reducing the number of dropouts is a top priority. He wants that number in single digits within the next few years.

In addition, 80 percent of the district’s schools were ranked “Recognized” or “Exemplary” on the Texas state assessments. That’s good, but Gonzales says he wants 100 percent to achieve that high academic status.

But reaching those goals seems reasonable, given the progress Brownsville has made so far and the district’s blueprint for success—a formula that is working.

“Student performance is our top priority,” Escobedo says. “As long as we keep that our focus, we’ll be okay.” ■

CHULA VISTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

It's easy for the Chula Vista (Calif.) Elementary School District to be overlooked. Located just south of San Diego, the 27,000-student district is one of more than 40 districts in sprawling San Diego County. One of those neighboring districts is the massive San Diego Unified, the nation's eighth-largest school system, attracting the lion's share of the public's attention.

So the Chula Vista Elementary School District quietly goes about its business. And that's fine with Chula Vista's leaders, because while other districts may get more attention, Chula Vista ranks among the



CHULA VISTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Chula Vista Elementary School District Board of Education:

Larry Cunningham, President
Patrick A. Judd, Vice President
Pamela B. Smith, Clerk
David Bejarano
Bertha J. Lopez

Governance structure:

Five board members are elected to four-year staggered terms. Board members are elected at-large.

Superintendent of Schools:

Lowell J. Billings

Student enrollment: 27,400

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 2%
Asian-American/Filipino: 12%
Hispanic/Latino: 65%
White: 12%
Other: 7%

Students receiving FRL: 39%

Students in Special Education: 10.2%

ESL/ELL students: 35%

Average per pupil expenditures: \$8,046
Staff: 2,525

Website: www.cvesd.org

The district is committed to the belief that all students shall exit elementary school as multi-literate lifelong learners. Through the school board's emphasis on accountability, the district has made demonstrable gains in narrowing the achievement gap.

nation's top urban school districts in academic achievement.

Two-thirds of Chula Vista's students are Hispanic and 35 percent of the student body has limited English skills. Given the district's proximity to the Mexican border, many of these students are immigrants who may not have received much formal education before coming to the United States. Nearly 40 percent of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. But despite these challenges, Chula Vista has seen steady academic growth and has significantly closed its achievement gaps between minority and white students.

Decentralized approach leads to academic growth

Chula Vista has made some particularly impressive progress in educating Hispanic children. Between 2002 and 2007, the percentage of Hispanic students passing California's standardized English Language Arts exam doubled. The percentage of Hispanic students passing the state math

exam increased by almost as much.

In 2007, district-level subgroups for African-Americans, English language learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and Latino students all met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both language arts and math.

State-level measurements also showed gains. California gives an English Language Development Test for students who are learning English as a second language. In Chula Vista, the percentage of students scoring at the highest two levels of proficiency on the California English Language Development Test increased 92 percent between 2001-02 and 2007-08.

One particular impoverished school, Otay Elementary, was recognized for its academic progress by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

There still is plenty of work left to be done—despite the gains, barely half of Hispanic students pass the math test and only 41 percent passed the English exam. But real progress is being made and at a

rate far greater than many other comparable school districts.

So what's the secret? Superintendent Lowell Billings says there is no secret formula, no single program or technique that has made the difference. Instead, he says the Chula Vista Elementary School District emphasizes school-level decision-making. Principals have broad authority to decide what works for their teachers, students, and staff. The central office provides support, not guidance.

Of course, this autonomy comes with greater responsibility. Principals are held accountable for their school's performance, but how they achieve those results is their decision. Billings makes it clear to principals that while he doesn't care how they get results, he does expect them.

Billings says the decentralized approach would not work if the school board didn't support it. Fortunately, it has, he says.

"I've never called a principal about a concern," says Larry Cunningham, Chairman of the Chula Vista Elementary School District Board of Education. He believes it is important for the school board to allow the superintendent to handle the day-to-day operations of the district, while the board keeps its eye on the bigger picture trends and goals.

Chula Vista's decentralized approach also applies to the school board's relationship with the administration. Billings says: "They don't have to go through me to talk to our cabinet members." In fact, he encourages board members to communicate with staff and collect information, so that board meetings can focus on academic performance, not the peripheral issues that often bog down boards.

Consistency a key

Maintaining some level of consistency is a struggle for many urban districts, as new programs, constantly changing personnel, and rapid administrative turnover frequently are problems for urban school systems.

"It's easy for school districts to jump around to the 'latest and greatest' idea," Billings says. "Sometimes, though, districts and schools try to do too much."

However, Chula Vista's decentralized approach has been in place dating back to 1995—an eternity in the ever-changing circles of education. Billings has worked for the district since 1991, coming up through the ranks in a variety of posts. He feels he has a personal stake in making the district the best it can be.

In addition, Chula Vista's Board of Education is remarkably close-knit and



ABOVE: The students are in charge at Junior Achievement's BizTown, where district students become grown-ups for a day in an interactive life-sized city that reflects San Diego County business and architecture.



LEFT: Parent organizations are active in all schools, and membership has increased at many sites. Here, parents at Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School sell books and other goods from their own ventures created through MicroSociety—United Nations of Parents.

tenured for an urban school board. Four of the five board members have served at least 10 years, with Vice President Patrick Judd now in his 20th year of service.

Many board members are long-time Chula Vista residents who have long and distinguished track records of community involvement. For example, board member David Bejarano is a former San Diego Chief of Police, while board member Pamela B. Smith has been honored as "Citizen of the Year" by the Chula Vista Chamber of Commerce. Other board members are active in a variety of community organizations, such as the YMCA and Rotary.

This track record of community service is indicative of the deep roots that board members have in Chula Vista. Such strong connections recently helped the school board pass a \$95 million school construction bond referendum with more than 75 percent of the vote.

Public support for future initiatives

looks promising. Standard & Poor's upgraded the district's bond rating from A to A+, and Chula Vista recently won the "Golden Watchdog Award" from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association.

PTA membership is on the rise, increasing 3.5 percent in this past year alone. The PTA enrollment growth is particularly notable in Title 1 schools, which traditionally have struggled to build parental support. For example, Lorna Verde Elementary increased its PTA membership from just 35 in 2006-07 to 155 in 2007-08. School board members depend on a District Advisory Council, comprised of parents and staff members from across the school system, in making key decisions.

Looking ahead, Cunningham and Billings say they don't plan on making any extensive changes. Instead, they plan to continue on their current and successful course, focusing on school-level decision-making, parental involvement, and employee empowerment.

"When it's all said and done, we want to be thought of as a great school district," Billings says. ■

OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Members of the Omaha Public Schools Board of Education can rightfully consider themselves survivors.

Just two years ago, it appeared the district would be divided into three separate units, thanks to a controversial bill passed by the Nebraska State Legislature. But even before that proposed split, the Omaha Board of Education was involved in a long, contentious funding dispute with state law-

makers. Like many urban school systems, the district faced problems of a middle class fleeing the city for the suburbs, an increasingly poor, unprepared student population, and rapidly rising numbers of immigrant students who didn't speak English as their primary language.

But now, the district is united, confident, and building what district leaders call "a two-county learning community." Sure, the Omaha schools still have challenges, but a plan is in place to improve schools, and educational leaders, teachers, and community members appear solidly in support of that plan.

A turbulent time

Omaha Board of Education President Sandra Jensen is too upbeat—and too polite—to complain. But since 2000, the school district she loves has been through some difficult, even dark, times that could try the faith of even the most optimistic person.

In 2000, the Omaha Public Schools faced some difficult budget decisions. District officials and school board members believed the state simply wasn't providing the funds to meet basic educational needs. Some of their problems with the state funding formula included:

- No consideration for small class sizes;
- No state aid for school construction;
- No funding for early-childhood and summer school programs;
- Inadequate special education funding; and

• Low-poverty moneys funded in arrears. After three years of unsuccessful negotiations, the school board sued the state, claiming the funding formula was unfair and broken. The case dragged on in court for years.

Gradually, state-level funding changes were made that helped the Omaha Public Schools. For example, pre-kindergarten programs were added to the finance formula,



Visiting poet Naomi Shihab Nye shares a meal with South High Magnet students and staff prepared by South's culinary arts class. Nye also visited Bryan High, Central High, and Northwest High. Students left to right: Morgan Engler, Luis Martinez, and Alejandra Calderon.

something Omaha school leaders had requested for years. Lawmakers also increased funding for low-income and limited-English students.

In 2005, the school board made a highly controversial move by annexing 25 suburban schools that were in the city limits, taking those schools away from smaller neighboring districts. That move created a firestorm of protest from residents in those communities. But Omaha board members cited an 1891 state law which allowed them to expand the district's boundaries to match those of the city limits.

And then came Bill 1024, which divided the Omaha Public Schools into three units, each racially distinct and imbalanced, with one predominantly white, one predominantly African-American, and one predominantly Hispanic district.

Community members, the local chapter of the NAACP, and the Omaha Board of Education rallied to oppose the split. In addition to filing suit to halt it, they also lobbied lawmakers. The effort worked, as

OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Omaha Public Schools Board of Education:

Sandra Kostos Jensen, President
Shirley J. Tyree, Vice President
Bambi Bartek
Mary Ellen Drickey
Barbara J. Dutiel
Freddie J. Gray
Nancy W. Huston
Nancy Kratky
Mark A. Martinez
Mona M. McGregor
Penny L. Sophir
F.E. "Fritz" Stanek

Governance structure:

Twelve board members, elected from subdistricts. Board members are elected to four-year terms in staggered elections.

Superintendent of Schools:

John Mackiel

Student enrollment: 47,770

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 31.75%
Asian-American: 1.82%
Hispanic/Latino: 23.88%
White: 40.99%
Other: 1.56%

Students receiving FRL: 61.97%

Students in Special Education: 15.17%

ESL/ELL students: 12.87%

Average per pupil expenditures: \$9,037

Staff: 7,811

Website: www.ops.org/district

state legislators changed their minds and reinstated the Omaha Public Schools as a single educational entity.

Striving for equity

Superintendent John Mackiel says at the heart of all of these controversies is the stark reality of what happens to poor children when they are isolated in extremely low-income schools. He says board members looked at the chronic problems facing many other urban school districts and decided something had to be done.

“We felt in Omaha, we had an opportunity to create a different destiny if we embrace the core values of public education,” he says.

The solution was two-fold: increase school funding, particularly for high-need schools, and improve integration efforts to prevent the high concentrations of poverty in individual schools.

Mackiel says that during the funding dispute with the state, the district did not want to appear that it simply had its hand out, looking for money at the expense of Nebraska’s smaller districts. So the Omaha Public Schools adopted its own funding equity policy. Additional money was shifted to the schools that served high concentrations of poor, at-risk students.

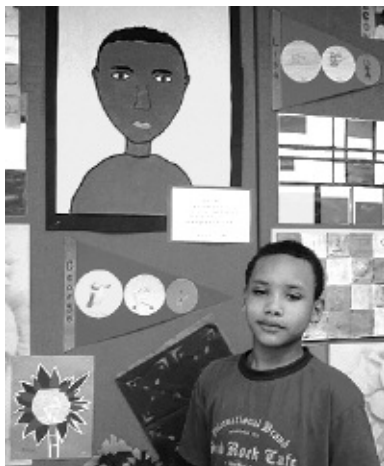
In other words, Mackiel said, the Omaha Public Schools showed it was willing to do what it was asking the state to do.

Much of this money was used to lower class sizes in the early grades at high-poverty schools. Money also was spent to provide additional tutoring and after-school remediation for struggling students.

Integrating the schools has involved a series of magnet and student choice programs. The programs have been wildly successful at the middle and high school levels, to the point where all of Omaha’s middle and high schools are voluntarily integrated, Mackiel says.

Mackiel said integrating elementary schools is “still an issue.” Parents of younger children are less likely to let their kids take long, cross-town bus rides, so families haven’t been as quick to embrace the magnet programs at the elementary level. But, Mackiel says, “you do the best you can” and, gradually, the elementary schools are becoming more integrated.

But rather than simply forcing integration, Jensen says the school board worked to build public support for it. Numerous community meetings were held in which board members listened to public concerns. Jensen says. They also appealed to middle-class parents on a moral level and tried,



with great success, to convince them that the steps the board was taking were the right things to do.

“We tried to put a human face on it,” she says. “You can talk all you want about statistics and numbers, but this is about children’s lives. And I think parents responded to that.”

Building a “learning community”

After years of struggles, Omaha school leaders believe their district now has a bright future—and there is ample reason for their optimism.

The board’s efforts to promote equity across the district took a tremendous step forward when the district decided to reassign teachers, so that even the poorest schools would have a core of veteran teachers. The plan took three years to implement and Mackiel held dozens of meetings with teachers to get their input on the plan. As a result, many teachers volunteered for reassignment and, ultimately, Mackiel ended up reassigning only 18 teachers involuntarily.

“So much of the resistance is based on misperception,” he says.

A recent bond referendum also built public trust in the district. The Omaha Public Schools passed the largest bond referendum in Nebraska history several years ago and the bond package was finished under budget, meaning extra money was left over for additional construction projects. Mackiel says school board members



TOP RIGHT: Catlin Visual and Performing Arts Magnet students recently showcased artwork during “Museum Night.” Second-grader Chloe Saplinza showcases a handmade quilt that was raffled off during Museum Night. TOP LEFT: Catlin fourth-grader George Burns interprets portraits for visitors who attended the event. BOTTOM: Lothrop second-graders Jaden Marshall and Eric Donovan study the anatomy of a crayfish during a recent Young Surgeons Club meeting.

took great care to ensure that upgrading older schools, which often are found in poorer neighborhoods, received as much attention as building new schools in high-growth areas.

“Ten years ago, only half of our schools even had air-conditioning,” he says. But the bond and other construction efforts have greatly improved facilities all across the district, ensuring that all Omaha students have a decent place to attend school.

Academic performance is on the rise in Omaha, and Mackiel and Jensen believe that the foundation is now in place for long-term success across the city, not just in pockets of wealth.

“It’s beyond involvement; it’s engaging the community,” Jensen says. “And when you engage them, you empower them.” ■

The CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence recognizes successfully governed school districts. The award is presented to the school district that best demonstrates excellence inboard governance, closing the achievement gap, academic achievement, and community engagement.

Each member will receive the application form for the 2009 Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence next March. All applications received by May 4, 2009, will be considered in the next judging process. We encourage all member districts to apply.

The 2009 Award for Urban School Board Excellence will be announced at the CUBE Annual Conference in Austin, Texas, Oct. 8-11, 2009.

About CUBE

For more than 40 years, the Council of Urban Boards of Education has been at the forefront in helping urban school districts strive for excellence. Established in 1967 by NSBA's Board of Directors, CUBE is the only national membership organization governed solely by urban school board members dedicated to the needs and interests of urban school boards. CUBE's mission is to create opportunities for urban school board leaders to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective policy makers and advocates for excellence and equity in public education.

CUBE represents 116 urban school districts in 35 states and the Virgin Islands. Our member districts educate nearly 8 million students in almost 12,000 schools with a collective budget of \$99 billion. CUBE helps urban school boards leaders find solutions to challenges at the local level and seeks to improve their policy making effectiveness. CUBE creates a forum for urban school board members to share innovative practices through issues seminars, conferences, legislative advocacy, research projects, professional networking opportunities, specialized publications, and local governance and policy assistance.

CUBE remains committed to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps and educating students in racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse settings.

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