



URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

URBAN ADVOCATE: 2009 AWARD EDITION

2009 CUBE ANNUAL AWARD FOR URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

The 2008-09 school year was difficult for urban education, largely due to forces beyond the control of educators. The nation's economic downturn proved to be a full-fledged crisis for many state and local governments, who in turn passed on the budget cuts to school systems.

School board members across the country faced the unenviable task of reducing spending while meeting a seemingly endless list of demands, including reaching federal Adequate Yearly Progress test score standards, educating increasing numbers of special education and limited English-proficiency students, and mitigating the effects of poverty.

But despite these challenges, many urban school systems had an exceptional year. The Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) received a record number of nominations for the CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence. It received so many, in fact, that five school boards are being honored this year for their efforts to promote student excellence.

The one common denominator of these five districts is consistency over time. Nowhere is that more true than in the Atlanta Public Schools, the winner of the 2009 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.

The Atlanta Board of Education is 10 years into a reform campaign that has transformed the school district from a poster child for what supposedly is wrong with urban education to an example of how good urban school systems can be. The district has retained the same superintendent through this process, an amazing accomplishment in the pressure-cooker world of urban school superintendents.

This year's runner-up is the Broward County (Fla.) Public Schools. Despite severe funding challenges and a widely diverse school system, Broward County has made consistent, long-term educational gains by sticking with its data-based reform program.

The Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools and Wake County (N.C.) Public School System both are recipients of the Honorable Mention for Outstanding Commitment and Service to Diversity—the first time CUBE has awarded this distinction.

Diverse schools have long been a priority in both Jefferson County and Wake County school districts. Each has successfully implemented new student assignment plans in recent years to ensure that schools remain diverse. They have been successful in this effort where so many districts have failed because of school boards committed



Board member Brenda Muhammad greeting a graduate from Maynard Jackson High School.

to these student assignment plans.

The Baltimore City Public Schools have been recognized with the Honorable Mention in Recognition of Progressive Leadership Award. Earlier this decade, the district's Board of Commissioners realized that significant changes needed to be made. So the board transformed itself from an operational body to policy-setting leaders, and then hired a new CEO to run the school district. The results have been inspiring, as both academic performance and public support are on the rise in Baltimore.

No one ever said leading an urban school system would be easy. But these five school boards are proof that urban school leaders who stay focused on the priorities that really matter can make a difference and that large, urban school districts can, in fact, be successful.

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ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To understand why the Atlanta Public Schools is the winner of the 2009 Council of Urban Boards of Education Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence, you first must understand where the systems has been.

Ten years ago, it would have been safe to assume that Atlanta wouldn't have been in the running for a major education award. In fact, during the 1990s, the district was held up in many circles as an example of what not to do. Student performance on state achievement tests was poor, among the lowest in Georgia. The school board was bogged down with in-

fighting. And the superintendent's office seemed to be equipped with a revolving door: Atlanta went through five top executives in a decade. A state takeover loomed as a possibility.

That was then. This is now. Student performance is on the rise, and the district now outperforms the state on federal Adequate Yearly Progress measures. Atlanta's academic progress on the NAEP earned the system praise and a visit from then-U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who declared, "You're a model for the country!"

The school board has implemented one of the most sophisticated set of board guidelines in the country, and the once-dysfunctional board now works as a cohesive team. Finally, Beverly Hall, the district's current superintendent, is celebrating her 10th year as Atlanta's education leader, a tenure nearly unheard of in the topsy-turvy world of urban education leadership.

So how did Atlanta make such a complete turnaround?

The beginnings of reform

No one could dispute that the Atlanta Public Schools faces plenty of challenges. More than 76 percent of the district's students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The district also is surrounded by the Fulton County Schools, which serves more than 88,000 students and provides a competitive option for parents looking to stay in Atlanta.

Throw in a school board that seemed mired in controversy, and it is no surprise that the district struggled so much during the 1990s. In fact, when the board first contacted Hall about the job, she didn't jump at the opportunity. The district's rapid turnover of superintendents was particularly troubling. Hall, then superintendent in Newark, N.J., didn't want to be the next superintendent to come into Atlanta to be chewed up and discarded in a year or two.

"It was clear to me coming in that all



Kathleen Pattillo, former board chair, greeting a 2009 Grady High School graduate.

of my predecessors couldn't have been poor-performing. In fact, I know several of these people and knew that wasn't the case at all. So it seemed to me there was a systematic issue that prevented anyone from staying long enough to get anything done," Hall says.

The problems extended beyond the superintendent's office. Principals were "hunkered down," Hall says, just trying to ride out the storm of change, knowing that their current boss was almost certainly a short-timer. A number of principals got their jobs through personal connections—Hall has replaced 89 percent of the district's principals since her arrival. The senior staff had been gutted by the superintendent turnover and few administrators with options wanted to work in such a chaotic environment.

However, Hall was recruited by a committee of Atlanta business leaders. The members told her they understood—and shared—her concerns, but assured her that they were in her corner and would stand up for her if she took the job. So Hall came to Atlanta, although still holding reservations.

Those fears proved to be well-founded in her first six months on the job. Hall says she experienced many of the same battles with the school board that doomed her predecessors. She was prepared to serve out until the end of the school year, then leave.

But, as promised, the committee of

ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education:

LaChandra D. Butler Burks, Chair
Cecily Harsch-Kinnane, Vice Chair
Khaatim S. El
Emmett D. Johnson
Yolanda K. Johnson
Brenda J. Muhammad
Kathleen B. Pattillo
Mark B. Riley
Eric W. Wilson

Governance structure:

Three board members are elected at-large; six by district. Members serve four-year terms.

Superintendent of Schools:

Beverly L. Hall

Student enrollment: 47,789

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 82.6%
Asian-American: 0.8%
Hispanic/Latino: 4.8%
White: 10.4%
Other: 0.1%

Students receiving FRL:

76.33%

Average per pupil

expenditures: \$12,189

Staff: 6,438

Website: www.atlantapublicschools.us



Vice Chair Cecily Harsch-Kinnane greeting a student at the new Springdale Park Elementary School.



Board Chair LaChandra Butler Burks giving greetings at the inaugural Calvin "Monk" Jones Lecture Series.

business leaders that lobbied for Hall came to her defense. The committee convinced the Georgia Legislature to change the Atlanta Public Schools charter to include a much stronger ethics component. Now, an independent citizen oversight committee has the authority to investigate complaints about individual board members.

The school board also stepped up. New board members were elected and the board consciously tried to change how it did business. Board members agreed to participate in professional development, which continues to this day.

"I see it as an ongoing circle of professional development," says School Board President LaChandra Butler Burks.

One major stumbling block when Hall was hired was the lack of clear delineation between board and administrative responsibilities. When Hall started, the board had seven different committees and board activities dominated the senior staff's time. That number was streamlined to two and the board was charged with setting policy and overseeing the budget. Liaisons were established between the board and senior staff, so that board members could no longer give direct instructions to administrators, as had happened in the past, often contrary to the superintendent's wishes. The board also now cannot overturn the superintendent's personnel recommendations except on a supermajority vote (7 of 9).

Unlike in many districts, the chief financial officer and chief legal officer in Atlanta reported to the school board, not the superintendent. This was amended in 2003, and those two officers were placed under the superintendent's oversight.

The changes prompted a turnaround

in the board's relationship with the superintendent. Now, everyone in the district was ready to tackle the daunting task of improving academics in the Atlanta Public Schools.

The turnaround

The blueprint for Atlanta's academic reforms isn't anything particularly revolutionary—data-driven decision-making, a focus on literacy and math, improving teacher training, holding principals accountable for results, and increased attention and resources for the lowest-performing schools. Hall also instituted salary bonuses for schools who meet targets in reading, math, and attendance. Most individual schools are given a great deal of leeway to determine their own academic programs, as long as they produce results.

The difference between the current plan and past reform efforts is that Atlanta's education leaders have stayed focused on these goals over the long haul. The school system had tried various reform programs in the past, but Hall says the frequent leadership changes prevented these programs from taking root.

The school board has done its part by ensuring that the money is in place for these efforts. Even during these difficult economic times, Burks says, the board has ensured that core academic programs are protected.

Board members also changed how they evaluated the district's progress. They ditched their lengthy, complex strategic plan in favor of a few easily measured, concrete performance goals. The superintendent is responsible for meeting these goals. The board is responsible for ensuring that funding is in place for these objectives. These measurable

goals also serve as the basis for the superintendent's performance evaluation, which removes the subjective, often personality-driven, evaluation process that had been used in the past.

This steady, focused approach is working. The proof is in the numbers.

Between 2002 and 2007, Atlanta improved its NAEP scores in every subject at each grade level. Every elementary school in the district met federal AYP targets, and Atlanta's students have made great strides in catching up with their peers across the state in reading and math. In addition, 72 percent of Atlanta's students graduated on time in 2008, compared to just 39 percent in 2002.

The schools also have become far more stable. In the fall of 2000, the district opened the school year with 700 teacher vacancies. By comparison, the district had just 18 teacher vacancies at the start of the 2008-09 school year.

In early 2009, Hall was named the nation's top superintendent by the American Association of School Administrators.

"When you look at our reform efforts, there's no way to have that without a superintendent in place and a board that has taken responsibility for these reforms," Burks says.

Moving forward, Hall and school board are turning their attention to middle and high school reform. Atlanta recently opened two single-gender academies at the middle school level and the district is breaking up its large, comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personalized schools of no more than 400 students. The Bill and Melinda Gates and Arthur Blank Family foundations have provided grants for the high school reform project. ■

BROWARD COUNTY (FLA.) PUBLIC SCHOOLS



One of Broward's prized gifts.

Contrary to prime-time television, life in South Florida isn't always glamour and luxury by the beach. In fact, Broward County Public Schools struggles with the same challenges of poverty, crime, and complex diversity that other large, urban districts must grapple with.

The district serves more than 255,000 students, making it the sixth-largest school system in the country. Of those, more than 30,000 are classified as "special needs" and the district's students speak more than 50 languages. School district officials are concerned that recent political unrest in Honduras could mean a surge of hundreds of refugees into the school system this fall.

But, if you'll pardon the pun, the Broward County Public Schools are a ray of sunshine in a tough urban setting.

The beginnings of reform

Broward County is offering proof that even the largest, most diverse school districts can excel academically. The school district is outperforming the Florida state

average at all grade levels in reading and math, as judged by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the state's standardized exam.

Perhaps more impressively, when the data is disaggregated, the district's minority students are doing better than their peers across the state. In particular, Broward County's Latino children are doing 7 to 12 points better than the state averages in reading and 8 to 14 points better in math across the board. Broward County's Latino students also substantially beat their state-level peers in standardized science and writing tests. Low-income and limited-English speaking students in Broward County posted similar results.

The students' success is mirrored at the school level. Nearly one-half of Broward County's schools—141 of 283—received a grade of "A" on Florida's annual state school report cards. Fewer than 8 percent of the district's schools received a grade lower than "C."

This performance isn't some one-year wonder, either. The school district's ac-

ademic profile has been steadily trending upward for years.

Between 2004 and 2007, the district made steady improvement on narrowing the so-called achievement gap between white and minority students. Again, Broward County students improved faster than the average

BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Broward County Public Schools Board of Education:

Maureen S. Dinnen, Chair
Jennifer L. Gottlieb, Vice Chair
Robin Bartleman
Beverly A. Gallagher
Phyllis C. Hope
Stephanie A. Kraft, Esq.
Ann Murray
Robert D. Parks, Ed.D.
Benjamin J. Williams

Governance Structure:

Two board members are elected at-large; seven are elected by district. Members serve four-year terms.

Superintendent of Schools:

James Notter

Student enrollment: 255,738

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 37.81%
Asian-American: 3.43%
Hispanic/Latino: 26.05%
White: 29.24%
Other: 3.17%

Students receiving FRL:

43.94%

Students in Special Education:

11.17%

ESL/ELL students: 9.32%

Average per pupil

expenditures: \$7,733

Staff: 37,114

Website: www.browardschools.com



Broward focuses on academics while encouraging students to develop their talents.



Florida student. SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement exam participation rates for African-American and Latino students also increased during this period.

In 2008, Broward County was named a finalist for Broad Prize for Urban Education. The award honors academic achievement in urban education, particularly for minority and low-income students.

The beginnings of reform

Not surprisingly, Broward County's success is attributable to planning and focus. Superintendent James Notter says the district and its governing board have been able to concentrate on the areas that most impact student performance and get past the distractions that bog down many other districts.

"Our focus is one of the things to which I attribute our success," says Maureen Dinnen, Board of Education Chair. "If you ask any board member their number one goal, it's student success. Many times in board discussions, we will stop and say, 'How does this affect student success?'"

That focus is guided by student performance data. Notter and his staff have long been proponents of using test score data to direct decision-making. In particular, he believes there is value in benchmarking Broward County's scores against Florida's other large, urban districts. The district recently implemented a three-year strategic plan which is heavily data-focused.

Broward County officials also put a great deal of emphasis on community

outreach. Such efforts are particularly important—and can be particularly difficult—in such a culturally heterogeneous district as Broward County.

Dinnen says that when the board has to make an important decision, board members don't wait for the public to speak up. Instead, members cast their net as wide as possible to solicit opinions, even using such social networking tools as Twitter to bring in public comment. The district's website and materials are translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and Creole (for the district's large Haitian population) so that non-English-speaking parents can get involved.

Notter says the school system also is partnering with AT&T on a program to refurbish old computers and send them home with students who otherwise couldn't afford them. AT&T is helping by providing these students free Internet access, and the district's goal is for every student to have wireless access within the next three years.

The state's ongoing budget crisis,



Top: Students embrace the Environmental Stewardship goal in the District Strategic Plan.

Bottom: Superintendent James Notter and Board Chair Maureen Dinnen getting hands-on instruction from high school students.

related to the nation's overall economic downturn, is the biggest problem the school district currently is facing, according to Dinnen. While the board will try to shield the most critical academic programs as much as possible, she says, painful budget cuts are coming. The board recently held a massive community meeting and video conference to discuss the budget situation. Dinnen has personally been to Tallahassee four times this year to lobby state lawmakers to protect school funding.

"We're really fighting every minute," she says. "Every single board member is determined this isn't going to defeat us." ■

JEFFERSON COUNTY (KY.) PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For more than three decades, the Jefferson County Public Schools had enjoyed diversity almost unheard of in the racially polarized urban school landscape of the 21st century. But a 2007 U.S. Supreme Court ruling dismantled the race-based student assignment plan that had produced Jefferson County's diverse schools—and threatened to end school diversity in Jefferson County.

School board members decided that diverse schools would remain a priority. Public opinion surveys conducted by the University of Kentucky found that 88

percent of respondents believed that diverse schools were important.

The Louisville Mayor's Office and Chamber of Commerce issued a joint statement in support of the original student assignment plan, saying an "integrated school system benefits the whole business community by educating students who will eventually become part of a highly diverse workforce upon which the city's economic growth depends. By the time students enter the workforce, it may be too late to eliminate the prejudicial attitudes and unfair racial stereotypes."

"There is a strong community investment in diversity, and there has been for 30 years," says Jefferson County Superintendent Sheldon Berman.

Armed with that support, the Jefferson County Board of Education and administration set about crafting a new student assignment plan that would keep diverse schools at the heart of the 98,000-student district. Those successful efforts have earned the school system the 2009 CUBE Honorable Mention for Outstanding Commitment and Service to Diversity.

A commitment to diversity

The board began work on a new student assignment plan almost immediately after learning of the Supreme Court's ruling. The new student assignment plan is based on the following core values: diversity, quality, choice, predictability, stability, and equity. The goals of the plan are to ensure that all schools have at least 15 percent and no more than 50 percent of



Eastern High School Jr. ROTC students climbing the obstacle course wall. The students from the Jr. ROTC program built the obstacle course on the school grounds.

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Jefferson County Public Schools Board of Education:

Deborah Wesslund, President
Carol Ann Haddad, Vice President
Linda D. Duncan
Ann V. Elmore
Joseph L. Hardesty
Lawrence W. Hujo, III
Stephen P. Imhoff

Governance structure:

Seven board members are elected by district. Members serve four-year terms.

Superintendent of Schools: Sheldon Berman

Student enrollment: 100,386

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 35.9%
Asian-American: 2.6%
Hispanic/Latino: 4.9%
White: 51.9%
Other: 4.7%

Students receiving FRL: 57%

Students in Special Education: 13.7%

ESL/ELL students: 5.3%

Average per pupil
expenditures: \$11,894
Staff: 13,326

Website: www.jcpsky.net

their students from low-income, predominantly minority neighborhoods. Race remains a factor in student assignment, although it now is only one component, rather than the whole.

The plan passed on a unanimous 7-0 vote, something rarely seen in often-contentious student assignment votes, particularly ones involving hot-button issues of race and socioeconomics. The local teacher's association also backed the new plan, providing the board with a key ally.

In crafting a new assignment plan, district officials weighed a more complex set of factors than simply race. The new plan takes into account household income, the percentage of minorities (not just African-Americans) within a school, and the parents' educational



Above left: Iroquois High School students line up for graduation.
 Above right: Student receiving a high-five from the teacher after his reading assignment at Cochrane Elementary School.
 Bottom: Jeffersontown High School students completing their chemistry lab assignment.

attainment. Jefferson County's 89 elementary schools were organized into six zones, and students were assigned within those zones to ensure diversity.

The clustering plan also meant that cross-town busing, which has proven controversial in other cities, would not take place. If students must be reassigned, they are sent to a contiguous school. Finally, when the plan was implemented, students were established at a particular school were allowed to stay. This grandfather clause took a great deal of the edge off opposition to the plan. As a result, the Jefferson County student assignment plan was not marred by angry, wide-scale community protests that have been seen in many other school districts during diversity-based

student reassignments. "It's been relatively well accepted," Berman says. "We made sure the community was highly invested in this." The board held public focus groups and forums to solicit community input and to keep parents informed of their progress.

But a new lawsuit, filed in 2009 by the attorney who successfully challenged the old race-based student assignment plan, may threaten the new Jefferson County policy. The lawsuit, which is still pending, contends that the current plan is too heavily based on race to be constitutional.

The board's leadership role

Berman joined the school district from Massachusetts in 2007—right around the time of the Supreme Court ruling. He makes it clear that the revamped student assignment plan could not have worked without the full backing of the board, saying that the 7-0 vote in favor of the plan sent a strong message that the board and administration were of

one mind on the issue of diversity. "They walked with us every step of the way," Berman says.

Independent assessments have noted the board's strong working relationship with the superintendent. For example, in the district's most recent accreditation review from the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS), reviewers paid a rare compliment to the board-superintendent relationship.

"The district clearly has adopted written policies and procedures that promote the effective operation of the system and the board appears to permit the administrative team to implement the policies and procedures without interference," the SACS report stated.

Working together, Berman and the school board also have restructured 15 high schools and implemented a district-wide reading program that has cut the percentage of students reading below grade level by more than half since 2003.

Jefferson County leaders say the Supreme Court ruling was a hidden blessing, as the end result has been a stronger, even more diverse, school system.

"We stand out as an example of what can be done, not what can't be done," Berman says. ■

WAKE COUNTY (N.C.) SCHOOLS

Most school districts, particularly in large urban areas, struggle with issues of diversity. Demographic changes over the last 40 years have left many urban schools with increasingly poor and limited English-proficient populations. In many cases, overwhelmingly so.

In Wake County, N.C., however, the question has been, “How does the district keep its remarkable existing diversity in the face of legal, socioeconomic, and educational challenges?” Wake County’s successful plan—and the aca-

democratic excellence that has resulted from it—has earned the district the 2009 Council of Urban Boards of Education Honorable Mention for Outstanding Commitment and Service to Diversity.

The case for diverse schools

The district based its current student assignment plan on the research of Richard Kahlenberg, Senior Fellow at the Century Foundation, who has written extensively on the need for integrated schools. While school integration traditionally has been advocated on social grounds, Kahlenberg argues that integration is beneficial for academic performance. The lowest-performing schools typically are those where the vast majority of students bring with them the associated problems that come with poverty. Teacher turnover rates in these schools are often alarmingly high and high-poverty schools usually get the least-experienced teachers in a district.

On the other hand, middle-class schools tend to be much more stable and draw active groups of parent volunteers. These schools also typically have fewer discipline problems and motivated students who encourage academic achievement among their peers.

But knowing these factors exist and

doing something about them are two different things entirely. Neighborhood schools are popular for obvious reasons: Parents like to have their children close to home and often choose where to live based on the schools in that neighborhood.

According to the goals of the Wake County plan, no school should have more than 40 percent of its population in poverty nor should more than 25 percent performing below grade level. Left to natural neighborhood boundaries, Wake County, like many school districts, would have some schools with as much as 80 percent low-income students. With court-ordered desegregation winding down, resegregation along race and class lines is becoming increasingly common in many urban districts.

In 2000, the Wake County Board of Education altered its long-standing race-based assignment plan to one based on socioeconomic and academic factors. But the end goal was the same: diverse schools.

“Board members and senior staff felt diversity was a component of healthy schools,” says Board of Education Chair Kevin Hill, a former principal and school administrator. “I really believe it makes a difference, but it is a difference

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Wake County Public Schools

Board of Education:

Kevin L. Hill, Chair
Horace J. Tart, Vice Chair
Beverly Clark
Eleanor Goettee
Patti Head
Ron Margiotta
Anne McLaurin
Lori Millberg
one seat currently vacant

Governance structure:

Nine board members are elected by district. Members serve four-year terms.

Superintendent of Schools:

Del Burns

Student enrollment: 137,706

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 26.1%
Asian-American: 5.8%
Hispanic/Latino: 11.5%
White: 51.8%
Other: 4.8%

Students receiving FRL: 28.4%

Students in Special Education: 13.1%

ESL/ELL students: 9.3%

Average per pupil expenditures: \$8,664

Staff: 18,000

Website: www.wcpss.net



Enloe High graduation ceremony.

many parents have trouble seeing.”

The biggest socioeconomic difference diversity makes, according to Hill, is in “wear and tear on the teachers.” A classroom teacher can handle, say, seven or eight kids from poor backgrounds who aren’t as prepared to learn as their peers. But when these types of students make up the entire class, it can be overwhelming even for the best teachers.

A history of diversity

Superintendent Del Burns says the district’s long-standing commitment to desegregation made the new plan much more palatable to the public. He should know. Burns began his teaching career in Wake County in 1976.

That year, the current district was formed by a merger of the old county system and the Raleigh City school system. Again, the desire for integrated schools was one of the major factors that led both school boards to decide merger was the best alternative.

The district’s previous race-based assignment plan produced positive results. But board members feared that an assignment plan based primarily on race might not withstand legal challenge in light of recent court decisions. They also wanted to more directly tie in the concept of student achievement to school assignment patterns.

Wake County also embraced magnet schools as a way to bring about diverse schools, as well as to relieve crowding in the outlying areas. The district launched a major magnet schools campaign in 1982 by offering arts, science, and foreign-language themes at inner-city neighborhood schools. Throughout the years, the magnet schools have remained popular among parents and have helped the district reach its goals for more diverse schools.

But that doesn’t mean the diversity policy is universally accepted, nor does it mean that the 2000 plan still doesn’t have its detractors. To this day, vocal parent groups continue to lobby for neighborhood schools, although the board and senior staff remain steadfast in their support of the diversity policy.

“I tell them, ‘Please don’t confuse getting what you want with being listened to. We do listen,’” Hill says. For example, the board held 11 hours worth of public meetings this past year to consider the district’s latest school redistricting changes. This was in addition to thousand of comments submitted via



Above: Artist in Residence performs with Powell Elementary dance students.
Below: Enloe orchestra performs at reception held after graduation ceremony.

the district’s website. These assignment changes will map out a three-year plan for student assignment, as opposed to the annual changes that have taken place in years past.

A blueprint for success

While the diversity plan is a key component of Wake County’s overall academic plan, it is not the only component. District officials and school board members are working in other ways to improve the district’s academic performance, which already rates highly among urban school districts.

The district long has been a champion of disaggregating test score data to identify struggling subgroups, even before this was required by the No Child Left Behind Act. The district uses data at the classroom level to identify areas that need reinforcing and at the school level to determine which schools

need additional resources.

A community-wide literacy campaign called “Everyone Reads” has made significant headway in boosting literacy rates. The district also has restructured 15 high schools in an effort to improve the school-to-work transition.

But even with a plan in place, Wake County isn’t through improving. Just this year, the district adopted “Professional Learning Communities,” which includes common planning time for teachers, something many have long advocated for.

At the end of the day, though, Wake County’s diversity plan remains the district’s calling card. That suits educators such as Burns just fine, given the long-term benefit it has had on the community at large, not just the school system.

“The result is that we do not have a system of have and have-not schools,” Burns says. “The schools are all strong.” ■

BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Like many large cities, Baltimore has seen its share of challenges in recent decades, challenges that have been felt by the local school system. The Baltimore City Public Schools have been steadily losing enrollment since the early 1960s, as middle-class residents move beyond the city limits into the suburbs or

choose to send their children to private school. The students left behind are largely poor (Baltimore's schools are 79 percent low-income) and minority (88 percent African-American).

However, the school board has made tremendous strides in overcoming these obstacles and creating a culture of success. For its efforts, the school board has been recognized with the Honorable Mention in Recognition of Progressive Leadership Award.

Five years ago, the needs of those students weren't being met in many schools. Test scores and graduation rates were low, and the annual dropout rate topped 10 percent. The school district had been through five CEOs in six years, creating an environment of constant turmoil.

Then a bombshell hit the Baltimore City schools in November 2003—a somber district financial official announced the system faced an immediate budget deficit of \$58 million.

"The public school system in Baltimore was imploding," says Board Chair Brian Morris. "The board needed to act quickly—because the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control."

Addressing the problem

After a painful budget triage—the board laid off nearly 1,000 employees and secured a \$34 million loan to cover the shortfall—members undertook an earnest examination of the district's problems and their role in perpetuating those problems.

Individual board members were actively involved in day-to-day operations at the time, creating a culture of micromanagement that Morris says was crippling the district. Board members learned they had to step back, set an overall direction, and let staff members handle the actual operations.

Progress was being made. In 2007, Andrés Alonso was hired as CEO to accelerate that progress. Twenty years earlier, Alonso stepped away from a career as a New York City attorney to become a special education teacher, and he spent more than a decade in the classroom. He ultimately became a high-level administrator in the New York City public schools before coming to Baltimore.

Some in the city initially were skeptical of hiring both an outsider to the city



DeAndre Tackett, an incoming fifth-grader at Abbottston Elementary School, touted his school's success on Maryland State Assessment test (MSA). At Abbottston Elementary, 100 percent of the students scored proficient or advanced in reading on the MSA.

and a non-African-American to lead Baltimore's schools. But Alonso worked hard to build relationships across the city and quickly won over his critics.

In his first year on the job, Baltimore's schools reached record highs on state standardized tests. The percentage of fifth-graders passing the Maryland reading assessment is now more than 75 percent, compared to less than half just five years ago. In 2008, a majority of the city's high schools (21 of 39) made federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards, compared to just five high schools in 2003.

"It hasn't simply been about test scores," Alonso says. Improving student attendance has been another key goal. The district has seen significant improvements in student attendance at all grade levels in the recent years.

Alonso believes in what he calls "an investment in access," or targeting resources to the areas of most critical need. The district has greatly expanded its pre-kindergarten program under his watch to serve 5,500 children. Also, the number of students taking algebra and Advanced Placement courses has increased significantly.

BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Baltimore City Public Schools

Board of Education:

Brian D. Morris, Chair

Jerrelle F. Francois, Vice Chair

Anirban Basu

James W. Campbell

Neil E. Duke

Robert Heck

Maxine Johnson Wood

David Stone

George M. VanHook, Sr.

Mitchell Generette (student member)

Governance structure:

Nine at-large board members and one student member are appointed by the mayor of Baltimore and the governor of Maryland. They serve three-year terms.

Chief Executive Officer:

Andrés A. Alonso

Student enrollment: 82,266

Students by ethnicity:

African-American: 88.4%

Asian-American: 0.7%

Hispanic/Latino: 2.8%

White: 7.8%

Other: 0.3%

Students receiving FRL: 74.6%

Students in Special Education:

14.8%

ESL/ELL students: 2%

Average per pupil

expenditures: \$15,379

(combined general and

grant funding)

Staff: 11,716

Website: www.baltimorecityschools.org



Students from Chinquapin Middle School share their victories at the Morgan State University's Science, Mathematics and Engineering Fair. The student teams placed and won special awards on various research projects, such as "What is the Mathematical Principle behind Spatter Patterns?" Judges and partners for this prestigious event included the US Navy, the National Society of Black Engineers, and the Armed Forces Communication and Electronics Association

The number that Alonso says he is most proud of is the steep reduction in the number of dropouts. This year, 1,000 fewer Baltimore students dropped out of school than just two years previously.

"Every one of those kids could have been a statistic," the CEO says.

Community input

Every school board will say that it values community involvement and input. But how does a board really engage the community?

In Alonso's case, it meant visiting with 120 different PTAs during his first year on the job. By the end of his first year, he had implemented a system that gave individual schools a great deal of funding and programmatic flexi-

Baltimore City School Board Commissioner Jerrelle Francois (front right), congratulates students from Abbottston Elementary School for their impressive work on the Maryland State Assessment test. Also pictured: Andres Alonso, CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, and Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education.



Top Photo: courtesy of Baltimore City Public Schools
Bottom Photo: BALTIMORE SUN STAFF/Kenneth K. Lam

based organization to promote parent participation in the district's poorest schools.

"We have spent an awful lot of time and resources on communication," Alonso says.

In addition to improving communications with the community, board members also sought to improve their own internal working relationship as well as their relationship with the superintendent.

"I came to the district with a mandate for change and I asked for authority, which I think a superintendent needs to have in order to be held accountable," Alonso says. He praises the board for its support. Meanwhile, board members say everyone is now reading from the same page.

"We all adhere to the guiding principle of 'What's best for our students?'" says board member Neil Duke.

And in 2008, something remarkable happened—for the first time in nearly four decades, the Baltimore City public schools actually gained enrollment. This year, another increase is projected.

"People are gaining confidence in the Baltimore City Public Schools," Alonso says. ■

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of Education 2009-2010
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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 2010 award of Urban School Board Excellence next March. All applications received by May 3, 2010, will be considered in the next judging process.

We encourage all member districts to apply.

The 2010 Award for Urban School Board Excellence will be announced at the CUBE Annual Conference in Baltimore, Sept. 30-Oct. 2, 2010.

About CUBE

For more than forty 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 118 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 socioeconomically diverse settings.



Serving America's Urban Public School Students

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Council of Urban Boards of Education**

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