

Urban Advocate

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A Membership Benefit of NSBA National Affiliates

Can more be done to bring equity to urban education?

New president offers hope that nation will recognize need for urban assistance

By Del Stover

Education is the “greatest civil rights issue of our time,” San Francisco Superintendent Carlos Garcia told the city’s human rights commission at a hearing on public school reform last fall. He isn’t alone in that thinking. With a new president in the White House, a number of education and civil rights groups are calling for a renewed focus on urban education—and action on the appalling inequities that exist in resources and educational opportunities.

“Educational underachievement of African-American students in public schools throughout the nation is the most glaring inequity and unfulfilled initiative of the incessant struggle for social justice,” says the National Alliance of Black School Educators. “Educational justice remains the most significant civil right that has not been provided to all African-American students.”

Although CUBE doesn’t portray the issue in those stark terms, it is focusing on issues of inequity this year—both in its



Detroit students observe a praying mantis in their eighth-grade science class at Dixon Elementary School. Making sure urban students have the same access to state-of-the-art labs and technology, as well as highly qualified teachers, is part of the agenda of CUBE, NSBA, and other education and civil rights groups.

conference programming and in its advocacy in Washington, D.C. CUBE Chair Steve Corona of the Fort Wayne, Ind., school board says this is the time for urban school leaders to redouble their advocacy efforts.

“We have a new president and educa-

tion secretary from a city, and we’re going to get more attention,” he says. “But we need to be smarter in regards to our advocacy work. We need to reach out to our members in urban districts to become

See Equity on page 8

INSIDE

3 San Diego scans records to spot early academic problems

7 Educators see legal obstacles where none exist, experts say

10 Teacher induction programs may not show quick results

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About CUBE

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 118 member school boards and the more than 8 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for four decades.

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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CUBE News

CUBE membership grows by 7 new school districts

Membership in CUBE offers a host of benefits for school leaders who want to learn more about good governance, stay abreast of urban issues, and lobby on behalf of urban education.

So CUBE is pleased to announce that seven new school districts have joined its ranks, bringing total membership to 118.

Our new member districts:

El Paso, Texas
Hillside, N.J.
Newport News, Va.
Piscataway, N.J.
Plainfield, N.J.
Warrensville Heights, Ohio
Washoe County, Nev.

Steering Committee eyes CUBE's strategic goals

Last fall, the CUBE Steering Committee met for its annual fall retreat with the goal of reviewing its strategic plan—a task last tackled in 2001.

The committee ultimately decided to “stay the course” with its current strategic objectives:

- Membership Engagement/Outreach

- Task Force Development and Support
- Building Partnerships and Collaboration with Related Organizations
- CUBE Advocacy

Committee members did suggest new ideas for achieving these goals, however, and the Steering Committee is expected to finalize these details by July.

Urban programming set for NSBA conference

CUBE is sponsoring a variety of seminars and lectures on urban education during the NSBA Annual Conference.

In an Early Bird session April 2, CUBE will sponsor school site visits to allow urban school leaders to tour exciting academic programs and high-quality schools in the San Diego and Chula Vista elementary school districts.

Programming continues April 3 with a full day of urban-oriented sessions, including a keynote breakfast presentation by Linda Darling-Hammond, as well as the CUBE Annual Business Meeting and a reception that evening.

Also planned are four special sessions:

- an Issues Forum focused on the sustained academic progress in the Atlanta Public Schools;
- a new urban school board leadership training session;
- an urban advocacy skills-building session featuring a new advocacy tool designed to measure community perceptions; and
- a session focusing on new survey results that explore the policy-making process and effectiveness of urban school boards.

For more programming information, visit www.nsba.org/cube.

Answer these questions before visiting San Diego

If you're one of many urban school leaders who enjoy the give-and-take at District Workshop sessions, why not do a little homework in advance this time?

At the workshop sessions scheduled in San Diego, the topic of discussion will center on the value of effective communications in today's budget crunch. Below are some of the questions that the CUBE Communications Task Force hopes you'll be prepared to answer:

- Has your school district made communications an ongoing priority in your budget?
- Does your district have an effective staff and communications plan in place?
- Does your board receive ongoing evaluations and reports on the department's quality and value to the district?
- What are you doing to communicate key points about your budget, as well as the struggles and decisions your board and superintendent must make regarding funding?

Trends & Analysis

San Diego scrutinizes records in search of students at risk

San Diego Unified School District is taking an in-depth look at its students' academic records, in an effort to identify at-risk students who could benefit from a timely intervention by teachers.

Last fall, the school board contracted with William Sanders, a statistician with the University of North Carolina, who developed the "value-added" method of measuring academic growth a quarter century ago while a researcher at the University of Tennessee.

Unlike traditional measurements, the value-added model shows the level of learning that has occurred from one specific period to another, instead of simply noting whether a student hit an arbitrary benchmark or not.

Just as an actuary plugs in data on lifestyle habits and family medical history to determine life expectancy, the value-added model determines a child's future academic performance by his or her past school progress. For San Diego students, five years of academic history will be scrutinized and tracked.

"It's a tool that will allow us to predict which kids are at risk for dropping out with a certain degree of accuracy," Deputy Superintendent Chuck Morris told the *San Diego Union Tribune*. "We'll be able to predict which students would have trouble with algebra as early as fifth or sixth grade."

Interestingly enough, the model does not take into account socioeconomic factors, such as poverty or a parent's education level.

As one can expect, the value-added model has its fans and detractors. Education researcher Gerald Bracey argues that the model is faulty because it's based on test scores, while Kati Haycock of the Education Trust says academic growth is good, but mastery of academic skills is better and should be the ultimate goal for all students.

Yet more and more school districts are implementing the growth model, and Ohio, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina all use the value-added measurement statewide. San Diego Superintendent Terry Grier used the model during his last post as schools chief at North Carolina's Guilford County Public Schools and apparently liked the results so much he decided to introduce the model in his new district.

Grier has big plans to reform the district and reduce its dropout rate, which mirrors the national average of one in every four students leaving school before graduating. In fact, Grier has made addressing the graduation rate one of his top priorities this year, no small wonder since it's tied to his job security—according to his contract, Grier could lose his job or a financial bonus if he doesn't increase the graduation rate by 2.5 percent this school year.

East Baton Rouge says takeovers a mistake

The Louisiana state board of education has voted to take over eight low-performing schools in the East Baton Rouge Parish School District, despite warnings from local school officials that such action will be "detrimental" to ongoing intervention efforts to help these schools.

Many of the East Baton Rouge schools dubbed "academically unacceptable" by the state have shown improvement in recent years, and "we know we are on a successful track," Superintendent Charlotte Placide said in a statement

before the state board's vote.

Over the past five years, officials say, their efforts have halved the number of schools rated unacceptable by the state.

"We have had a comprehensive, districtwide curriculum in place since 2005 aligned with state standards," Placide said. "We offer first-class professional development for all our administrators and teachers, and we have proven academic strategies in place to improve student achievement."

As *Urban Advocate* went to press, local officials were considering litigation.

Centralized facility to trim Houston's food-services budget

In these tough economic times, efficiency and cost-cutting are on the minds of many urban school leaders, and costs surrounding school cafeterias have been drawing some attention. Now, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) is ramping up a new approach to food services that should ease its bottom line.

It's moving to mass-produced school meals.

A new \$50 million centralized food services facility eventually will prepare 220,000 meals daily for HISD students, says Dave Richardson, executive general manager for Aramark, which runs HISD's food services. Pre-prepared meals already are being sent to some school campuses and reheated for serving in cafeterias.

With a state-of-the-art kitchen, sizable storage, and a modern distribution center, he says, "this dynamic facility truly positions HISD as a leader in child nutrition. It allows us to serve more-nutritious, high-quality meals every day, while also yielding greater controls and efficiencies."

So far, only a few campuses are receiving the pre-prepared meals, but all of HISD's nearly 300 campuses eventually will be served.

Lower costs are a major advantage of the central kitchen, Richardson says. More food products can be bought in bulk, and the district can end contracts to outside vendors who provided some food storage and distribution services.

The centralized system also reduces payroll costs at school cafeterias across the district.

Not all advantages are monetary, however. Richardson says centralizing food preparation also allows ingredients and recipes to be more closely monitored for nutritional value.



A school bus passes as people walk bundled against the cold and snow in Trenton, N.J. Bitter Arctic air sent temperatures well below freezing in parts of the country this winter, causing headaches for schools.

Freezing temps cause headaches

Everyone knows that a good snow can play havoc with the smooth operations of a school system's bus fleet. But school officials living in more temperate climates may not think about the impact of really cold weather.

How bad can cold weather affect things? Just before Christmas an Arctic front swept through Denver, dropping temperatures to below zero—and making it difficult for school transportation per-

sonnel to start about two dozen buses in the school district's fleet.

That caused student pickups for eight city schools to be delayed for an hour.

In January, Milwaukee closed its schools because of street ice and worries about children outdoors in subzero weather. The Anchorage, Alaska, schools also closed because of icy streets and high winds. It was so cold the city's metro buses suspended service, too.

Milwaukee trims student suspension rate

After being decried for having one of the highest—if not the highest—suspension rates of any urban school district in the country, the Milwaukee Public Schools eagerly released its annual report in December that showed disciplinary infractions have decreased significantly.

The district report card, a collection of student and school data culled from the 2007-2008 academic year, showed suspensions have dropped about 15 percent so far this year compared to the same period last year. Meanwhile, the duration of the suspensions has dropped by more than 20 percent during that time.

The Council of Great City Schools, an urban school advocacy organization, issued a report last spring that determined Milwaukee's disciplinary process was "oriented toward setting forth punitive consequences rather than toward reinforcing positive behavior." The study team said

during a site visit to the urban district that the suspension rate at MPS was the highest it had ever encountered.

In the 2007-2008 school year, more than a quarter of all students were suspended at least once—many multiple times. In total, 86,675 suspensions were issued in 2007-2008; close to the student enrollment for the entire system.

This year is starting out much calmer: 12.3 percent of students have been suspended at least once, compared to 14.4 percent this time last year. The comparison periods only stretch until the last week of November, so there is room from further improvement or regression.

But Superintendent William Andrekopoulos attributes the decreases to a number of new initiatives including hiring more school resource officers, training teachers on effective classroom management practices, and introducing "violence free zone" programs in schools.

N.Y.C. teachers vote to support school-wide performance bonuses

When you test a school-wide performance bonus program, how can you tell if teachers like it? When teachers at 98 percent of schools eligible to participate vote to give the bonus pay plan a chance.

This year, the faculty at 201 high-need schools in New York City were asked to participate—and 197 agreed. In 42 schools, teachers voted unanimously to participate.

"Teachers across the city have told us how gratified they were to be recognized for the success of their collaborative focus on student achievement and their hard work," schools Chancellor Joel Klein said in a statement after the vote. "The biggest winners, though, were the students in these high-needs schools, who received instruction and support they needed to reach new levels of performance."

Eligible schools were randomly selected from a group of high-needs schools, identified by such factors as low test scores, poverty rates, student demographics, and number of English language-learning and special education students.

To distribute bonus pay, each school establishes a "compensation committee" comprised of the principal, a designee of the principal, and two representatives elected by United Federation of Teachers (UFT) members. The committee can distribute the money evenly among teachers or award bonuses by job title or by individual contributions to the school's gains.

Last year, teachers at 124 schools shared more than \$20 million in bonuses for meeting performance targets. Bonuses ranged from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per full-time UFT member at each school.

According to UFT President Randi Weingarten, the results are promising because "teachers at so many schools eligible to participate have voted to do so again. These results show that if an innovation is collaborative and fair, teachers will embrace it."

People

Recent months have seen a number of high-visibility personnel changes in the nation's urban school systems:

In Los Angeles, **Ramon C. Cortines** assumed the helm of the nation's second-largest school system. Formerly superintendent in San Francisco, New York City, and, briefly, Los Angeles, Cortines replaced David L. Brewer, a retired Navy admiral, who was ousted in December.

The Detroit School Board has fired Superintendent **Connie Calloway** as the financially troubled school system faced an estimated \$408 billion deficit. Calloway was hired in March 2007 and was the third superintendent to be fired in the past two years.

Tom Boasberg has been promoted from chief operating officer of the Denver Public Schools to its superintendent. He replaces Michael Bennet, who resigned after winning election to the U.S. Senate.

After hours of deliberation and questions about whether to restart its superintendent search, the Nashville school board voted 7-2 to hire **Jesse Register**, who served as schools chief in Chattanooga, Tenn., from 1996 to 2006.

IN OTHER NEWS ...



Carol Johnson, superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, has received the Joseph E. Hill Superintendent of the Year Award from the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE).

22-year veteran retires from LAUSD board

Over the last two decades, Julie Korenstein has fought for better nutrition in school cafeterias, an end to school overcrowding, and, most lately, to block Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's efforts to seize control of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

This June, she will retire after 22 years of school board service to the city's schoolchildren.

It's been a great experience, she says. "My greatest joy is walking into a classroom and seeing little children reading. The importance of public education ... it's a central part of a democratic society. It's one of the most important things that we provide for our society."

First a parent volunteer and then a teacher in the nation's second-largest school system, Korenstein was elected in 1987. Over the years, she's focused on environmental issues affecting schools, such as pushing for a reduction in the use of toxic and carcinogenic pesticides to rid buildings of pests. She has supported both phonics-based reading programs, as well as standardized reading programs for the elementary schools.

Described as a key ally of the teachers union, Korenstein also has been a proponent for parents, hosting an annual parent summit at the beginning of each school year to help parents get the latest LAUSD information.



Julie Korenstein

One of her lasting legacies is the district's massive, multi-billion-dollar school construction project, which is easing decades of overcrowding and renovating aging schools. "We've built 74 schools, and we have about 58 to go," she says. "It was a tremendous feat to do. We were extremely overcrowded, and we didn't have enough seats for children."

A fierce proponent of local control, Korenstein opposed Villaraigosa's efforts in 2006 to put the school system under mayoral control. One observer told the *Los Angeles Times* that "she lobbied probably every member of the legislature. She was there mano-a-mano with decision-makers making her case."

"I've given it a great deal of my life for a long time," she says. Noting that two of her grandchildren attend LAUSD, "there's a long history of public education in my family."

Reilinger steps down as Boston chair

Elizabeth Reilinger, who led the Boston School Committee for 11 years, stepped down this January, choosing not to seek re-election to the post.

"It has been an honor and a privilege to serve on the Boston School Committee and to be part of a significant reform movement that has advanced academic opportunities and achievement for students in the city of Boston," she says. "We have witnessed what can be accomplished when we work together around the critical agenda of improving education for our young people."

During Reilinger's tenure as chair, the schools established rigorous standards and accountability measures, expanded early education opportunities, launched a vari-



Elizabeth Reilinger

ety of reform initiatives, and worked to improve district operations and management. In 2004, Boston won the CUBE Annual Award for Urban Board Excellence, and in 2006, the Broad Prize for Urban Education. In 2007, the Council of Big City Schools honored her with the Richard R. Green Award.

Reilinger says she intends to complete her term on the school board, which ends in 2010.

"Few people understand how critical school board leadership is to the overall academic success of a school community and the superintendent's job," says Boston Superintendent Carol Johnson. "Dr. Reilinger has brought tremendous foresight and commitment to the Boston School Committee."

As budget shortfalls hit districts, more dangers lie ahead

Full effect on property taxes, school debt payments won't be known for months

Ouch! That's the most polite expression that urban school officials can use to express their pain at falling state revenues and growing budget deficits, which threaten their efficient operation of schools and the recent academic progress of their students.

As *Urban Advocate* went to press, the Los Angeles Unified School District was talking of laying off as many as 2,300 teachers in the middle of the school year. The 694,000-student school system must close a \$250 million shortfall, which comes even after \$400 million in cuts before the school year began.

Meanwhile, the Detroit Public Schools is suffering a double blow—not only a weak local economy but also declining enrollment—and faces a \$408 million deficit. The fiscal crisis, along with criticism that the administration failed to stop state financial oversight, led to the ouster of Superintendent Connie Calloway.

Money is so tight that the Miami-Dade County school board is suing Florida, hoping to recoup \$34.7 million it alleges was improperly withheld because of changes in tax rules. Last year, it eliminated thousands of jobs and cut administrators' salaries, and more cuts are likely after state lawmakers cut education spending by \$466 million.

Yet, while well aware that state education funding is threatened, urban school policymakers need to pay attention to other looming financial dangers on the horizon, says John Musso, executive director of the Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO).

School leaders need to be prepared, for example, for a possible drop in property taxes, he says. Although usually seen as less vulnerable to economic downturns than state aid, the large number of foreclosures that is occurring, decreased tax collections, and an erosion of the tax base means property tax revenues could take a real hit.

Just how bad local revenues may decline isn't clear right now because of how these taxes are collected, and that's something school leaders need to consider in their planning, he says. The worst is yet to come.

"Typically, property taxes are escrowed in [mortgage] payments, so schools col-



Lincoln High School teacher Sharonda Brown stands in her empty classroom in Dallas last fall, hours after being told that her position had been eliminated. Brown said, "I'm not worried about myself. I can find another job, but I worry about my students who might be taught by someone less qualified." Dallas officials laid off hundreds of teachers to balance their budget—a difficult move facing urban school leaders nationwide.

lecting property tax payments now ... those payments were made in the past," Musso says. "But if those payments are not being paid right now, that means schools are not going to get those property tax revenues in the next 12 to 18 months."

Another concern for school boards is whether they can meet their long-term debt obligations. With revenues down, some school boards might need to raise their mill levies to cover their payments on capital bonds, and in states with a tax cap, school systems may find themselves between a financial rock and hard place.

"Are those districts going to be able to assess mill levels high enough to pay the premiums on those bond payments?" Musso asks.

No one likes to think that a school district might default on its bond payments, but insurance companies could experience huge claims that threaten their resources, creating an economic issue similar to the mortgage crisis.

"There's a lot of circumstances that could play out in this deck of cards we've got," Musso says. "We're not running around saying the sky is falling, but certainly it is a low ceiling."

Such concerns must be watched, but for now, many urban policymakers are worried about making it to the end of the school year. Urban schools in California are being particularly hard-hit, as the state's general

fund faces a \$42 million debt over the next 18 months. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed cutting education spending by \$2.1 billion in this academic year and another \$3.1 billion next year.

One of the governor's more controversial suggestions is cutting five days off the school year.

Not every state has been hit that hard, but as revenues shrink, urban school policymakers are facing some tough choices. Rising budget deficits could lead to larger class sizes, cuts in programs aimed at English language learners, and the elimination of summer school and other remedial programs that have helped raise academic achievement among low-income children in recent years.

One of the ironies of this crisis is that some of the short-term decisions that school boards make to balance today's budgets could end up costing school districts more money down the road.

A laid-off teacher "can't sit around at home waiting for a call from the schools," Musso says. "They'll look for a new job, and they may not leave it once the economy improves. Then all of a sudden, you may be aggressively trying to recruit people, which will cause a shortage ... and you're probably going to be paying higher dollars for positions that you're not paying now because it's going to be a highly competitive market."

Superintendents overestimate legal, contractual constraints

A close look at legal options reveals surprising freedom to push through reforms

It's a common lament: State laws or collective bargaining agreements make it impossible to fire a bad teacher—or transfer veteran teachers to the low-performing schools where they're most needed.

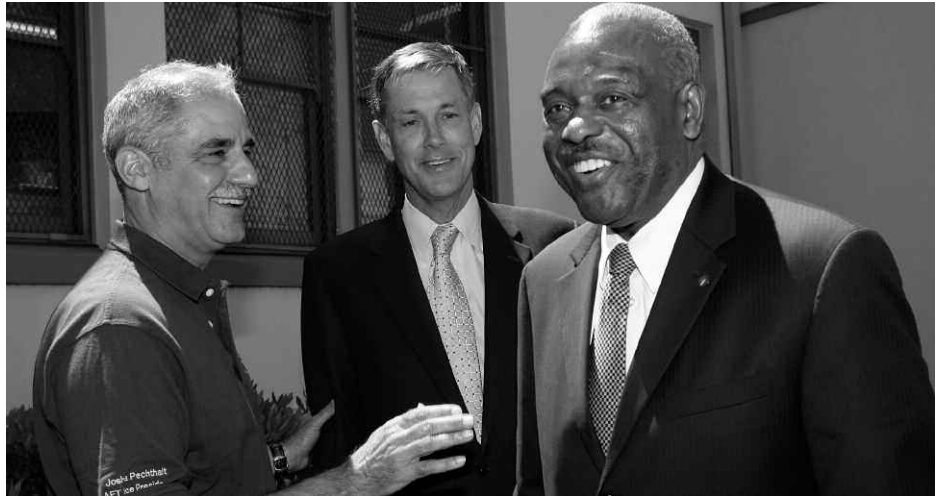
But maybe it's time to take another look at such complaints. It just might prove that such so-called restrictions actually are assumed—or just accepted practice—and without any real basis in reality.

That's the suggestion of a new paper, *Cages of Their Own Design? Superintendents and the Law*, by Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and Lance Fusarelli, an associate professor and director of the education graduate program at North Carolina State University.

No one disputes that local, state, and federal laws and regulations place huge restrictions on the ability of school administrators to make decisions. In New York City alone, a principal must contend with 846 pages of state law, 720 pages of state regulations, 15,000 decisions made by the state commissioner of education, a 204-page teachers' contract, and numerous court rulings, as well as mandates and rules from another 50 sources found by Hess and Fusarelli.

Yet studies by educator scholar Perry Zirkel suggest school administrators are less hamstrung legally than is often supposed, and that their complaints reflect “a distorted assessment of education and law.” That conclusion was supported by Hess in previous research, where an analysis of work rules and teacher contracts found that “more than half of the districts studied have considerable ambiguity in their labor agreements” and that “labor agreements may represent a less substantial barrier to school improvement than critics have suggested.”

To bolster their point, the researchers cite examples of superintendents who've tested the limits of their legal options. In Washington, D.C., they note, schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee restricted seniority rights by dusting off a decades-old statute permitting principals to weigh other



Last summer, David Brewer (right), then-superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, took time out of his day to hold a news conference regarding the school system's legal efforts to stop a one-hour job action planned by United Teachers Los Angeles. With him are Joshua Pechthalt (left), vice president of UTLA, and Jack O'Connell, California's superintendent of public instruction.

factors alongside seniority in staffing. These powers previously had been overlooked, even as district officials complained “they could do nothing when senior teachers displaced younger peers.”

Meanwhile, John Deasy, during his tenure as superintendent in Prince George's, Md., transferred hundreds of teachers and initiated a voluntary pay-for-performance plan. Although criticized by the teacher's union, Deasy said “nothing prohibited any of this. Why does it not happen? Most people see the contract as a steel box. It's not.”

The contention of Hess and Fusarelli is that school administrators (and, we can assume, school board members) focus too much on the limits of the law and the risks of litigation and they fail to look at what the law does permit. Conference seminars and magazine articles also fall into the same trap—and perpetuate this myopic perspective of education law.

“That's partly because we haven't done a good job of exposing superintendents and school leaders to other ways of doing business,” Hess says. “It's partly because they're trained and socialized to value collegiality and consensus. It's partly because the civic leadership wants them to minimize the ripples of conflict, and the result is this enormous premium on coloring within the lines.”

Not that it's easy—or always wise—to push the limits of a district's legal options. Pushback from the teachers union or par-

ents can weaken a superintendent's support on the school board or distract the school district from other priorities.

That's likely why corporate leaders see the law with a different perspective, Hess says. Without so many political concerns, they look for ways to use the law to achieve goals or, at least, find a way around legal obstacles and test legal boundaries.

School leaders “don't do a very good job of testing those boundaries,” he says. “The inclination and ability of superintendents to push existing boundaries will be a product of the resources they have and the political support they enjoy.”

The real point of Hess and Fusarelli is that school leaders need to think “outside the box” and look at how the law can serve as a tool in their efforts to improve education—and not just assume legal obstacles exist or are insurmountable. In the end, superintendents and school boards are in control of their future.

“Contrary to the defensive tone that characterizes most discussions of district leadership and the law, superintendents are not merely victims of statute, code and contract—they are agents in crafting the constraints they face,” the authors conclude. “Superintendents who seek to reshape system routines and culture, challenge existing constraints, and have the legal and political resources to do so may well find the impediments less severe than is often imagined.”

EQUITY

Continued from page 1

more involved. We need to help Congress understand the very specific needs we have and provide them with a better appreciation for what happens in an urban classroom.”

Given President Obama's early career as a community organizer on the South Side of Chicago, as well with his repeated remarks citing the need for a greater federal attention to America's urban centers, there is some guarded optimism that urban education will see greater attention paid to it in the new administration.

As *Urban Advocate* went to press, the Obama administration had yet to establish one of the most exciting policy measures aimed at urban America: a White House Office on Urban Policy. As described before President Obama's inauguration, federal dollars currently are spread among several federal agencies, leading to a costly and uncoordinated effort to help urban areas.

The Office on Urban Policy will “develop a strategy for metropolitan America and ensure that all federal dollars targeted to urban areas are effectively spent on the highest-impact programs,” the Obama presidential campaign said in the fall. Among the initiatives it will oversee:

- More support for urban teachers, including expanded service scholarships “to underwrite high-quality preparation for teachers who commit to working in underserved districts.”
- Expanded early childhood education opportunities, with a \$10 billion investment per year in Early Learning Challenge Grants to encourage preschool opportunities for children 5-years-old and younger, as well as provide more funding for Early Head Start and Head Start.
- Anti-dropout initiatives, including programs aimed at urban middle schools and grants for “evidence-based models that have proven to reduce dropouts.”

Such measures are welcome, but basic increases in federal funding also are needed, Corona says. “We need to advocate for more dollars with respect to remediation,” he says. Urban leaders also need to identify their infrastructure needs, as Capitol Hill is being asked to fuel the economy with federal work projects. “Clearly they've talked about infrastructure improvements, such as bridges and highways. There's no reason that schools shouldn't be on those lists.”

There's some logic to tying schools into



A large crowd rallies outside the Richard J. Hughes Justice Center in Trenton, N.J., as the state supreme court holds hearings on the School Funding Reform Act of 2008. That state law attempts to alter the funding mechanism that provides many poor, urban school systems with supplemental funding.

the current political debate on investing in America, says Reginald Felton, NSBA's director of federal relations. “We see investment in education as the new president does, as a component of our economic recovery. You can't say we want to build up our economic structure and leave out education, and if you address education, you've got to address those students who are least likely to receive the educational services they need.”

Agreeing is Brenda Welburn, chief executive officer of the National Association of State Boards of Education. “Now more than ever, we need federal policies that build public educators' capacity to prepare all children to thrive in an increasingly challenging world. In this time of alarming economic uncertainty, federal investments in education are critical investments in the nation's long-term prosperity.”

Such investments couldn't come too soon, say critics of the federal government's recent commitment to education. So far, the cumulative federal shortfall for Title I spending over the past five years totals about \$43 billion, and the federal government has never come close to meeting its promise to pay 40 percent of special education costs.

This underfunding, along with state funding practices that are woefully inadequate for urban schools, have resulted in high-poverty schools having less money for students than surrounding affluent suburbs, older and more poorly equipped facilities, and a greater likelihood that students are being taught by less-experienced and less-qualified teachers.

“Basically, the kids who need the most, who have the greatest needs, don't get their fair share,” says Cindy Brown, director of education policy for the American Center for Progress (ACP), a

public policy think tank in Washington, D.C. “We just don't give enough money to the schools based on needs.”

The “teaching gap” between affluent and high-poverty schools also is of great concern, says Claus von Zastrow, executive director of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of 18 leading education organizations, including NSBA.

“Report after report demonstrates that, by almost every measure, the poor kid in urban areas is less likely than their more fortunate peers to have access to good teachers,” he says. “That's a biggie. We're going to have to figure out a way to solve that, because at this point, we're just diminishing the chances of kids.”

ACP is pushing to solve that inequity by calling for changes in the “comparability provision” of Title I, which calls for equitable spending between rich and poor schools. According to Brown, a loophole in the law allows districts to allocate equal staff resources without regard to salaries. But, poorer schools have less experienced, lower-paid teachers, which means actual spending in schools serving a high-poverty neighborhood can be significantly less than another school in the same district. (One researcher found spending differences of nearly \$400,000.)

“If you had that extra money, you could have master teachers, teacher induction programs, teacher coaches, more professional development in areas where students need help,” Brown says. “There are many strategies to help if funding in these schools is fairly distributed, but that's not happening.”

Unfortunately, economic trends are conspiring against early hopes that an Obama administration would narrow the inequities that exist. With proposals for an \$800 billion economic recovery plan and a spiraling federal deficit, some polit-

ical observers question how much the White House can push for new education spending.

Meanwhile, state budgets are facing growing deficits from the economic slowdown, leading to threats of major cuts in K-12 spending. In California, for example, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, facing a possible \$42 billion state deficit, proposed in January the controversial idea of shortening the school year by five days.

Meanwhile, hard-earned progress on closing the student achievement gap of minority and poorer children is being undermined as school officials look to lay off teachers, raise class sizes, and cut non-essential services, including remediation, after-school, and other programs that have proven so effective in helping academically struggling students.

If more money for schools does become impossible, urban schools still may benefit if President Obama can advance some of his other proposals for urban communities, such as plans for health and family support for low-income expectant mothers, after-school programs, and job creation initiatives. All of these programs could “mitigate the effects of poverty” that help to distract school-age children from learning, von Zastrow says.

Indeed, educators need to speak out more for these issues that appear peripheral to public education, he says. “Very often there has been a tendency to think that we can address some of the problems that urban students face—and leave other [community] problems to fester. But to close the academic gap, it’s difficult to do without added supports outside the school. We need to make clear that these out-of-school supports—in early childhood, health care, and after-school programs—are in no way incompatible to serious in-school improvement efforts. In fact, they are mutually supportive.”

Urban policymakers also need to make the case for help to Latino students, says Erika Beltran, education policy analyst for the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). Only 53 percent of Latino students are graduating high school in four years, and among English language learners, the rate is even worse—41 percent.

“It’s a serious crisis,” Beltran says. “NCLR is a civil rights organization, and we see education as one of the fundamental rights that all children should have access to. We’re trying to make recommendations that the [U.S. Department of Education’s] Office for Civil Rights look

As education secretary, Arne Duncan has firm grasp of urban challenges

For urban policymakers, one of the most positive signs to come out of the Obama administration is the nomination of Arne Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, to serve as the next U.S. Secretary of Education.

“In selecting his education secretary, President Obama has chosen a leader who has demonstrated expertise and effectiveness in managing and leading one of the nation’s largest school districts; in addressing the challenges facing America’s public schools; and successfully leading initiatives with demonstrated and significant increases in student achievement,” NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant said after Duncan’s nomination. “Duncan represents a realistic view about what is possible in our schools and what will lead them into the future.”

Duncan is the second urban superintendent to be tapped as secretary of education. Rod Paige left his post as superintendent while in Houston to serve as education secretary during President George W. Bush’s first term.

Duncan is seen as a pragmatic educator without ideological baggage. During his seven years as head of the nation’s third-largest school system, he championed charter schools, shut down low-performing schools, and experimented with new strategies to recruit and retain teachers. He also has



Arne Duncan

supported the creation of smaller schools, as well as the use of private companies to manage schools.

Duncan also is credited for his focus on teacher quality and graduation rates.

“He really knows urban education,” says Cindy Brown, director of education policy with the American Center for Progress. “Having grown up in Chicago and worked for the system even before he was superintendent, he’s done a lot of important things. He’s definitely someone who thinks business as usual isn’t going to meet the challenges of public education in this country.”

at federal education programs and how they’re implemented. There’s a lot of confusion in states about how to use Title III money [for ELL students]. What we’re seeing is a lot of schools using those funds not only to serve ELL students, but for a variety of other things, like transportation.”

While much more needs to be done, Felton points out that progress has been made in recent years. The No Child Left Behind Act, with its reporting requirements with disaggregated data, “has raised the level of awareness and directed more focus on students who are not doing well in our urban school systems,” he says.

But NSBA certainly believes more must be done, Felton says, and recommendations for federal policymakers have been incorporated into a report, *A New*

Era in Education: Redefining the Federal Role for the 21st Century. The report calls for a variety of measures regarding funding, accountability, standards, easing of federal mandates, and other legislative priorities that will help urban school board members to better do their jobs.

Many of these proposals ultimately will tackle some of the inequities that exist in urban education, Felton says. But policymakers will be arguing over specifics and priorities for years to come. “How we reaffirm our focus on equity issues—and what are the best practices and initiatives that urban communities should take on—will be a rich discussion.”

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Research and Reality

Comprehensive teacher induction programs lack early punch

Study finds no improvement in ability to retain teachers or improve instruction

It makes sense that providing mentoring and other supports to new teachers will make them more successful in the classroom—and lower the numbers who drop out of the profession in just a few years. So what should you make of a new study that suggests comprehensive teacher induction programs have no such effect?

Take a closer look, as it turns out.

Impacts of Comprehensive Teacher Induction, a study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research Inc., put teachers into a comprehensive teacher induction model, overseen by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., and the New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz. These teachers received more mentoring and guidance on instructional practices, as well as more time in professional activities, than teachers in a control group that received the less-intensive level of beginning teacher support that prevails in schools today.

The study involved more than 1,000 teachers in 418 schools in 17 large, urban, high-poverty school districts.

But classroom observations showed no impact on teaching practices, and student test scores were similar to the control group. Teacher retention rates also weren't affected.

At a cursory glance, local policymakers might logically question whether teacher induction programs live up to their promise. But that's a premature conclusion. For one, the report's findings only cover the first year of the study. It might prove that it takes time for schools to properly implement the induction programs—or it takes more time for a program to influence the classroom behavior of new teachers.

"The first year of teaching is complicated and challenging, and teachers' ability to absorb information and translate it into measurable changes in practice and student achievement may be limited," Amy Johnson, director of the study and a senior vice president at Mathematica, suggested in a statement announcing the findings.



New teacher Amanda Edgecomb helps first-graders with a writing assignment in her Eugene, Ore., classroom. A growing number of school districts are channeling dollars into formal programs to help first-year teachers succeed and, they hope, stick around. Having a formal mentoring program was important to Edgecomb. "That was something I asked about in my interview, actually," she said. "I'm pretty resourceful, but there are times as a first-year teacher when things come up and it's really helpful to have this."

Numerous studies—as well as the experience of school officials—still strongly support the premise that mentoring and other support systems are beneficial to new teachers and help with retention.

But some educators have pointed out that such positive outcomes depend on how well the programs are implemented, whether they have sustained administrative support for years, the quality of training for mentors, and the time mentors are allowed to spend with new teachers.

The comprehensive programs used in the study included "carefully selected and trained full-time mentors, [and] a curriculum of intensive and structured support for beginning teachers," the report states. Mentors were asked to meet weekly with their new teachers for approximately two hours, and monthly professional development was provided.

Yet many teachers in the control group also received mentoring and other support, notes Steven Glazer, principal investigator of the study. On average, new teachers in the two programs received only 21 additional minutes of mentoring each week than those in the control group—offering a possible explanation for why more of an impact wasn't found.

Still, teachers in the control group

"were getting [support] very qualitatively different than what teachers are getting under these comprehensive programs," he says.

So what can school board members draw from all of this? One has to be careful. But, for one, the findings suggest school boards might not see immediate results if they invest in a teacher induction program. Suggestions that school districts will see savings in such programs—that lower teacher turnover will reduce recruitment costs—also are questionable.

"Our study doesn't say that teacher induction isn't effective," Glazer says. But if school boards are planning to use scarce dollars to support new teachers, early evidence suggests school districts won't see any immediate savings from moving from a modest teacher induction program to a more comprehensive effort.

Glazer also points out that the study doesn't look at other strategies for retaining teachers, and he suggests boards keep an open mind about how it selects and supports new teachers, the possibility of incentive bonuses, and other options.

"If retention is a problem, other policy levers might be useful," he says.

The report is available at www.mathematica-mpr.com.

Best Practices

Sponsor-A-Scholar pushes Philly's poorest kids into college

By Naomi Dillon

In terms of size, the Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS) program is small potatoes. Each year, just 50 new freshmen are selected from Philadelphia's public schools to be part of this four-year (and often longer) effort to get them to college and beyond. In terms of success, however, SAS is hard to match.

Since its inception two decades ago, 756 students have gone through the SAS program and graduated from high school. Nearly all of them enroll in college and, to date, 275 students have earned a degree. Another 200 are still attending college.

"A number of our students wouldn't graduate from high school without us, would never have gone on to college without us, or gone to the college they did," says Joan Mazzotti, executive director of Philadelphia Futures, the non-profit group that runs the SAS program.

The program is the signature piece in the organization's mission of preparing and helping low-income students to obtain a college education.

"It's not by chance they succeed," Mazzotti says. "It's through a tremendous amount of interventions."

Tremendous is an understatement.

While there are many pre-college outreach programs across the country, not all of them take the comprehensive approach of SAS. Some focus purely on academic preparation, providing after-school and summer workshops, test prep, and tutoring.

Others stress the importance of mentoring, between peers or with an adult role model. Still others center on building awareness of college opportunities and encouraging long-range planning for college and career.

SAS does it all and more—and it must with the students it targets. All are plucked from the lowest-performing high schools in Philadelphia, where graduation rates are about 50 percent. What's more, all students come from impoverished backgrounds (the average family income is around \$20,000) and are exposed to many of the social ills—violence, substance abuse, and homelessness—that surround impoverished neighborhoods.

The SAS program relies on high school



Some of the material used to inspire students and supporters of the Sponsor-A-Scholar program.

counselors to spot promising students who are often challenged everywhere but in school. Admittedly, SAS relies on a somewhat subjective selection process as "promise" is hard to define and sometimes even harder to realize.

"Ours is not easy work," says Mazzotti, who acknowledges that, despite all the benefits of the program, it is difficult to find students who are willing to be part of an intense and long-term endeavor.

It starts with matching each incoming ninth-grader to a mentor, a volunteer in the community who agrees to commit five years to the student.

"This isn't read a book to them once a week and you're done," says Mazzotti, who has one mentor on her seventh year with the program. "These are long-term relationships that are built."

Each student also is assigned an SAS coordinator, staff members who act as a liaison between parents, mentors, and school counselors. They monitor the student's progress, and keep them on track at school and at home.

Throughout their high school career, SAS students are enmeshed in various academic skill building, college prep, and enrichment activities, with an average of 350 hours of programming offered every year. Students attend after-school classes at least once a week, Mazzotti says, and spend a good portion of their summer in academic programs at local colleges. This

summer, for example, sophomores explored "Citizenship and Social Change" through the prism of computer technology at Drexel University.

All of this hard work (and there's plenty that hasn't been mentioned) would be for naught without the generosity of the program's financial sponsors. There's little point in dreaming of a college education unless you can afford it.

What's more, although college enrollment among low-income students is growing nationwide, only a fraction actually graduate. Approximately 25 percent earn a degree of some kind, with the figure dropping to 20 percent for black and Latino low-income students.

To overcome these statistics, each SAS student is paired with a sponsor who pledges \$7,500 to his or her education—\$1,500 to cover the high school program and the rest doled out each semester of college. To date, Philadelphia Futures has raised more than \$5 million in sponsorship funds that are disseminated directly to SAS students.

Once in college, SAS students aren't forgotten. Intensive support continues throughout their college years and often beyond. "We're not a program, we're a cult," Mazzotti says. "I joke [that] we stop at wedding planning."

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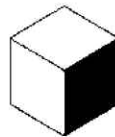
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