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Charters create policy challenges for urban districts

Market forces at work, and districts must adapt or feel pain of competition

By Del Stover

To understand why the charter school movement has such momentum these days, it's important to look beyond the political support offered by the Obama administration—or the public relations bonanza provided by such recent documentaries as "The Lottery" or "Waiting for Superman."

It's also important to consider the mindset of parents like Marlene Gonzalez.

A resident of Camden, N.J., Gonzalez was concerned about the education of her elementary school-aged son. She looked at the test scores of the city's secondary schools—and listened to stories about their safety and disciplinary issues. And then she made a decision: A few years ago, before he transferred to a city middle school, she enrolled her son at LEAP Academy University Charter School.

"The schools within Camden are tough," she says. "But you never hear stories about LEAP as you do, unfortunately, about other [city] schools. So, as your child is growing up, you keep saying to yourself, 'is this what's waiting for my child?'"

Math teacher Trenise Duvernay has the attention of students in her fourth-grade class at Alice M. Harte Charter School in New Orleans. Nearly sixty-one percent of the city's students attend charter schools.

AP Photo/Gearld Herbert

Some might quibble with this mother's assessment of the Camden city schools—or her assumption that a charter school was a better educational option for her son. But what should matter for school board members is that Gonzalez had a choice—and she took it.

That wasn't always possible. For years, the local public schools held a near-monopoly on educational services. Only those families who could afford private school—or could move to a more affluent community—had any real choice in picking their children's schools. At best, inner-city parents might wrangle a transfer to a city's more academically rigorous—and usually safer—magnet schools.

But all that is changing—not only in Camden but also across the nation. Today, approximately 5,000 charter schools operate across the U.S., and although they enroll only about 3 percent of American schoolchildren, nearly half these charters are concentrated in urban communities. And, where that concentration is particularly high, charter schools have become

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Urban Advocate

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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 112 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 Annual Conference

Urban school leaders gather in Baltimore

Promoting racial diversity in segregated urban schools, confronting the challenges created by charter schools, and improving science instruction—these were some of the policy issues that urban school leaders discussed at NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education 45th Annual Conference Sept. 30 to Oct. 2 in Baltimore.

More than 150 school board members, superintendents, and senior administrators gathered for the three-day conference. This year's theme was: "Urban School Leadership: Meeting Today's Challenges." The meeting was highlighted by the presentation of the 2010 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence and the Benjamin Elijah Mays Lifetime Achievement Award.

In addition to 10 workshops on various policy issues, conference attendees also had an opportunity to visit Baltimore's innovative Great Kids Farm, a PK-8 charter school, and a college preparatory school. Attendees also had several opportunities for networking, a popular and productive benefit of the conference.

Day-to-day coverage of the conference was available online at *School Board News Today* (http://schoolboardnews.nsba.org), but a summary of conference highlights is included here. As an additional service to CUBE school districts, conference handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and reference materials are available on the CUBE website (www. nsba.org/cube).

Henry Godfrey awarded lifetime award

Former Hampton City, Va., school board member Henry J. Godfrey is the winner of the 2010 Benjamin Elijah Mays Lifetime Achievement Award.

Godfrey was honored at the CUBE Annual Conference. The award is given to an individual who has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to representing the educational needs of urban schoolchildren through his or her service as a school board member.

In accepting the award, Godfrey took time to remember the achievements of Mays before delivering a "call to action" to school leaders. He urged educators to never accept that students' futures are decided by the poverty or social ills surrounding them.

"Our young people more than ever need strong school systems," he said. "Their future is not determined by the present condition of their environment or upbringing. Each and every student is a product of choice. They have a choice to decide what kind of person they want to be. It's up to us as educators to mentor and believe in them."

Godfrey has devoted the past five decades to students in the Virginia Tidewater region. He began his career in 1961 as an elementary school teacher in the Newport News Public Schools. For the next 29 years, he served as a teacher, then elementary, middle, and high school principal in that school district. In 1990, he became deputy superintendent for administration for the Newport News Public Schools and held that position until his retirement in 1996.

In 1997, Godfrey joined the school board for Hampton, Va., where he served until 2010. During his tenure on the board, Godfrey championed alternative education programs to assist at-risk students. In May 2010, Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell paid a visit to Hampton to tout the district's success in reducing the dropout rate.

CUBE RESOURCE DIRECTORY

The 2010 CUBE Resource Directory is a networking tool designed to foster easy and fast communication among urban school leaders. You will be able to locate personnel and other vital demographic information about each CUBE district.

This publication is one of the many benefits provided to CUBE members through the NSBA National Affiliate Program. To access or download this year's directory, visit the CUBE website (www.nsba.org/cube).

Educators must look beyond simplistic ideas, Noguera tells CUBE

Too much of the debate over school reform is shaped by political and ideological beliefs—but isn't shaped enough by what research and successful urban schools can tell the nation about what makes good schools.

So argues Pedro Noguera, executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education and noted professor and researcher at New York University.

Noguera was keynote speaker at the CUBE Annual Conference.

"I am troubled by the way these debates get framed, because as we know, sometimes when it gets too extreme, the truth gets lost," he said.

Take the simplistic debate currently under way about charter schools, Noguera said. Even the Obama administration is guilty of contributing to the mistaken argument that charters are successful alternatives to the public schools.

"I serve on a committee that authorizes charter schools … and I'm the first person to say, just because it's a charter, it doesn't mean it's better," he said. "We've completely lost sight of the fact that charters were conceived as schools to provide laboratories for education. Now we're in competition with charters … we're at odds with one another."

The facts also have been lost in the debate over "bad" teachers, Noguera said. Teachers are an easy target for blame, and that's led some of the reform debate to turn to teacher union bashing.

But, if there's going to be a debate over who is accountable for poor student academic performance, he added, when is that debate going to turn to the responsibilities that parents are supposed to shoulder for their children's success in school?

Pedro Noguera

And, if people are going to throw around blame, who should be held accountable for asking high school teachers to educate ninth-graders who enter their classrooms reading at a third-grade level?

The reality is that many troubled high schools never had a chance, Noguera said. "They were designed to fail because those schools were overloaded with high-needs students, English language learners, special education students, and kids coming in below grade level. And they were staffed with the least-experienced teachers."

The failure to look at the real issues behind today's education problems also can be seen in the politically popular suggestion that policymakers close so-called "dropout factories," he said. Closing these schools create other problems. What's to become of the students once their schools close?

Simply moving students is no guarantee that their new school will be any more successful in dealing with their educational deficiencies, he said. "You need to provide the additional resources to give that [new] school a chance to meet those students' needs. But that's not part of the conversation. We just talk about shutting schools down."

What policymakers really should discuss, he said, are the underlying reasons that these troubled high schools fail—usually because their feeder middle and elementary schools are failing to teach students to read.

Noguera encouraged school board members to not allow today's simplistic, polarized debate to cloud their judgment.

"I encourage you to focus on the evidence. It's interesting we talk so much about data—at looking at research—to make decisions. But right now, most of the decisions made in education are not based on research. They're based on politics. And that, unfortunately, sometimes prevents us from doing what makes the most sense."

Urban districts honored at awards luncheon

The winning school district of the 2010 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence—and the three finalists for the award—were honored at a luncheon during the CUBE Annual Conference.

Winning top honors this year was the Baltimore City Public Schools, acknowledged for its double-digit state test score gains, the significantly improved academic performance of minority students, its ability to increase public support, and its sharp cuts in the number of students dropping out of school.

"This board is one that has constantly worked," school board Vice-Chair Jerrelle Francois, told the luncheon audience as board members accepted the award. "We have our disagreements, and sometimes we don't like each other, but we have a singular purpose, and that singular purpose is that every child, no matter what the school—transformation, charter, or traditional—that child will enter into an environment where they can grow up to be anything they want to be. I am extremely proud of that."

She added the school board had worked hard "to let parents and the community and children know that we care for them. They are more than numbers on a chart."

Also recognized at the luncheon were the three finalists: Florida's Broward County Schools, Houston Independent School District, and Virginia's Portsmouth City Schools.

GWINNET COUNTY WINS BROAD PRIZE

Winner of this year's Broad Prize for Urban Education is the Gwinnett County, Ga., school system.

"Gwinnett County has demonstrated that an unwavering focus across a school system—by every member of the district and the community—can lead to steady student improvement and achievement," U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said when the prize winner was announced.

Finalists were North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; the Montgomery County, Md., schools; and the Socorro and Ysleta independent school systems in Texas.

After reform-minded tenure, Michelle Rhee calls it quits

Former District of Columbia Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee may have quit the job that made her a national figure in school reform, but her brand of reform is likely to continue under new Washington, D.C., Mayor Vincent A. Gray.

Shortly after Rhee announced her resignation, then-Mayor Adrian Fenty (who lost his re-election campaign to Gray in September) and Gray announced that Kaya Henderson, Rhee's second-in-command and a former colleague at Teach for America, would be interim chancellor. Gray said he expected Henderson, who is viewed as more likable and collaborative, to continue the same path for improving D.C. schools.

Rhee and her polarizing reforms were considered a factor in Fenty's defeat in the Democratic primary. Even before the election, many speculated that Rhee, who is engaged to Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, would soon leave Washington. After her resignation announcement, she launched a website, www.michellerhee.org, to keep her supporters abreast of her plans and thoughts.

Rhee took the newly created chancellor's job in mid-2007 with a mandate to turn around the district, which had extremely low student achievement and a central office widely viewed as dysfunctional. One of her first orders entailed closing nearly two dozen schools, many that were well below capacity.

Rhee

The next year she proposed a radical new contract with the teachers union: give teachers the option to earn up to $140,000 each year, based on student test scores, in exchange for their tenure. The proposal was lauded by some researchers but scorned by the union. In 2010, a new contract that offered smaller pay raises and bonuses for student achievement—but weakened the tenure system—was approved.

With the new contract, Rhee embarked on what became her most controversial move, firing 266 teachers, and made what became an infamous quote: "I got rid of teachers who had hit children, who had had sex with children, who had missed 78 days of school." The teachers union and some D.C. Council members charged that she had no basis to make the statement.

Rhee also made headlines for firing administrators, including the principal at her daughters' higher-performing public school. Those actions, coupled with her straightforward personality and a perceived lack of community input, made her a polarizing figure in the 2010 election.

An August poll commissioned by the *Washington Post* showed 44 percent of Washington, D.C., residents approved of her job performance and 38 percent disapproved.

In an Oct. 17 farewell commentary published in the *Post*, Rhee and Fenty said that at the beginning of their tenure they had made a pact to make all decisions in the best interest of children, and that pact became their "true north." However, they admitted to falling short on ensuring broad support for the initiatives.

This time, however, the pact cannot merely be between two people. "It must be forged among an entire community," they wrote.

Houston offers cash and perks to encourage student efforts

The Houston Independent School District recently joined a growing list of cities experimenting with so-called learn-and-earn programs, which aim to boost academic achievement by offering students cash incentives and other perks.

Funded by the Dallas-based Liemandt Foundation, the $1.5 million pilot program differs from similar projects adopted in a dozen states and countless urban school districts by rewarding students and parents for better performance, in this instance, on math tests and objectives.

Harvard economics professor Roland Fryer Jr., who has led large-scale studies in Chicago, New York, Houston, and Washington, D.C., involving more than 38,000 students and mostly private money, is teaming up with Houston to follow its program. It's apparently based on Fryer's most successful model in Dallas.

There, second-graders earned $2 for each book they read, proven by passing a short quiz. Fryer's research found focusing and rewarding students for simple tasks ultimately yielded big rewards in the form of improved reading comprehension. This was in contrast to the uniformly poor results in Chicago and New York, where cash incentives were based on test scores and grades.

Houston plans on paying fifth-graders and their parents $2 for each math concept the child masters in a series of short, five-question tests. Parents can also earn money for attending frequent conferences with the teacher to assess their child's progress. Ambitious families can earn just over $1,000 in the program.

Whether schools pay students for better grades or better attendance, public support of earn-and-learn programs is low, with only one in four agreeing with the practice, according to the 2010 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll.

But with behavioral economics becoming a popular method for private employers and health insurers to get adults to lose weight, stop smoking, or hit performance goals, it's likely these same strategies will proliferate in schools.

"Maybe it will encourage the kids to do better, to work a little harder, and get the parents more involved in their child's education," Houston mom Adela Ruiz told the *Houston Chronicle*, before adding, "Parents really shouldn't have to get paid to get involved in their children's education. It's their responsibility."

AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

Newspaper analysis of teacher quality sparks debate in Los Angeles

The newspaper headline sounded innocuous enough—maybe a bit too innocuous. It read "Who's Teaching L.A.'s Kids?"

What followed was an exhaustive *Los Angeles Times* analysis of the teaching abilities of more than 6,000 third- and fourth-grade teachers. With the help of an analyst at the Rand Corp, the *Times* determined the "value-added" impact that each teacher supposedly had on his or her students. Then it ranked them publically, from the least to the most effective.

Citing two fifth-grade classes at Broadous Elementary School, the *Times* said: "The students study the same lessons. They are often on the same chapter of the same book. Yet year after year, one fifth-grade class learns far more than the other down the hall. The difference has almost nothing to do with the size of the class, the students, or their parents. It's their teachers."

Then the newspaper identified both the effective—and ineffective—teacher.

Was this ethical? Was it even accurate?

In a later opinion piece in the *Times*, Bruce Fuller and Iiaoxia Newton, education professors at the University of California, Berkeley, argued that it was neither. The comparison "fails to take into account differences in student background," the professors wrote, "including English proficiency, parents' education levels, or home practices that affect children's learning. Hospitals wouldn't fire a doctor or nurse who focused on caring for the elderly or poor because his patients die at higher rates."

In some ways, the *Times* did what some districts across the country are already starting to do: Evaluate teachers, at least in part, on how well their students do on tests. The newspaper just took it a step further.

"We want to pay the highest-performing teachers better and rate them higher than those that aren't," Neil Dugger, an assistant superintendent for the Irving School District in Texas told the *Dallas Morning News*.

The newspaper said the Texas Education Agency recently received $53.5 million in federal grants to set up a pay-for-performance plan, based on student test scores.

A few weeks after the *Times* report, a popular fifth-grade teacher, who had been ranked "less effective," apparently committed suicide in a remote forest area. Teachers union leaders said the 39-year-old teacher had been despondent over the rankings. The union boycotted the paper and said it should remove the rankings. Others said the causes of suicide are too complex to blame on one article.

In a statement, the newspaper extended its condolences, but said it published the database because it "bears directly on the performance of public employees who provide an important service, and in the belief that parents and the public have a right to judge the data for themselves."

Parents disagree on returning schools to control of New Orleans board

Who will run the New Orleans schools? The question speaks volumes about the chasm in public opinion that has opened up among parents who are unhappy with the state-run Recovery School District and want schools turned back over to the seven-member Orleans Parish School Board and charter school proponents who say their children have flourished under the largely independently run schools.

The heated battle concerns issues as unique to New Orleans as Hurricane Katrina and its devastating aftermath, which resulted in the rapid growth of charter schools and a state takeover of all but 16 of the highest-performing traditional schools. And it offers a disturbing look at how charter schools, however high-performing and revered by some in the community, can be a divisive force.

Those divisions were in full view Oct. 14 as residents packed a 450-seat auditorium at McDonogh No. 35 High School to debate a plan by State Superintendent Paul Pastorek to gradually transfer control of some high-performing schools from the state to the parish school board.

"Give us back our schools," said Leon Clark, according to an account in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. He called Pastorek's transfer plan "a total failure."

Before Katrina, the school district suffered from financial mismanagement and abysmal student test scores, but the *Times-Picayune* said it had recently made the case that it had improved.

Charter school advocates offered a much different perspective.

Kyla Muse, whose child attends KIPP Central City, said the parish board hasn't proven itself capable of resuming control.

"I personally believe that until we see further improvement of Orleans Parish School Board schools to match what KIPP Center City offers, there should not be any consideration given regarding Orleans Parish being able to oversee additional schools," she said, according to the newspaper.

The state board of education was scheduled to vote on the Pastorek plan on Dec. 9 in a vote the *Times-Picayune* characterized as "sure to be contentious."

PUBLIC SERVICE ADS THANK DETROIT VOTERS FOR BONDS

The Detroit Public Schools aired a series of public service announcements (PSAs) this fall to thank city voters for a $500.5 million bond issue last year—and to let them know that their public dollars are being wisely used.

"Since voters approved Proposition S just one year ago, we have been on an aggressive timeline to move these projects forward on time and under budget," DPS Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb said in a public statement.

Scheduled to air in November on local television and radio, the PSAs remind voters that the new construction program will provide students with "state-of-the-art facilities," as well as provide "thousands of jobs" for local workers.

In total, the construction project calls for a new "Office of Public Safety Headquarters and Operations Center and seven schools, major renovations at nine more, in addition to demolition projects and security and technology upgrades," school officials announced.

TEEN MOTHERS GARDEN
Students look over a vegetable garden they tend at the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit. The Detroit school, which serves pregnant and parenting teens, includes gardening and farming in its science curriculum. The teens learn the fundamentals of gardening and farming through hands-on training.

Has anyone seen the strategic plan lately?

Are strategic plans obsolete? Perhaps the better question is: Are the lengthy, weighty-sounding documents that promised much (albeit in vague terms) but often delivered little ... are they a thing of the past?

Judging by the way some urban districts are approaching strategic planning today, the answer could be a qualified—and welcome—yes. One innovation is an increasing role for the public and outside groups. For example, in February the board of the San Diego Unified School District allowed the 10 schools in its Point Loma area to pool their budgets and come up with their own spending suggestions, according to the *San Diego Union Tribune*.

And in Richmond, Va., which has never had a comprehensive plan, the school board is commencing its planning process by asking the public three broad questions: What are we doing right? What should we stop doing? What should we start doing?

"This is not just for parents," School Board Chairwoman Kimberly Bridges told the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. "We want to know what we're doing right and what we could do better."

That kind of directness and emphasis on results are indicative of a new kind of strategic thinking.

"There is a revolution going on in planning," Doug Eadie, CEO of Doug Eadie & Company and columnist for *American School Board Journal*, said recently at a National Affiliate webinar. "You have to be aware of it, and it's basically the emergence of the portfolio approach. It's kind of a lean-and-mean approach to getting change, and the beauty of it is—it works."

Using this approach, school board members and outside groups identify specific problems the district needs to address, anything from bullying in middle schools to a looming financial crisis, Eadie said. This typically happens at a board retreat. The board usually doesn't take a vote at the retreat, but instead refers the challenges to a board planning committee. Later, the board prioritizes these "change challenges" and takes steps to ensure they are addressed.

Which is what Richmond wants its planning process to accomplish.

"This will not be a plan from the 17th floor downtown on down," Superintendent Yvonne W. Brandon has said, referring to the district office in City Hall. "This will be from the community up."

"This initiative will provide a very concise and very precise road map for this district."

Reports on safety are voluntary—and questionable

It's a label no school wants, but 20 Philadelphia schools have it. The label is "persistently dangerous," and according to reports to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Philadelphia is the only district in the state with schools that qualify.

Some Philadelphia schools have a violence problem—that fact is beyond dispute. In October, 11 students were arrested after a series of fights at West Philadelphia High School, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. And last Dec. 3 at South Philadelphia High School, several students were beaten after about 70 students stormed the cafeteria and the so-called "Asian floor" of the troubled school, said the Associated Press.

But how certain can parents be that the self-reported school violence statistics are accurate? How is it true, for example, that no other high schools in Pennsylvania have similar problems? Critics, such as school security expert Kenneth S. Trump, say the security reports, required by the No Child Left Behind Act, can vary according to the rigor of various states' reporting requirements.

Yet even within a single state, criteria for reporting violence—as well as other behavioral problems required by state and federal law such as truancy, and tobacco, alcohol, and drug use—can vary tremendously. For example, a review by the *Salt Lake City Tribune* found that Utah's 68,000-students Granite School District reported 5,642 truancies for the 2008-09 school year, while the state's 81,000-student Jordan School District had none.

The same discrepancies crop up in reports of school crime.

"If you think about it, what's the incentive for a school principal to report crime?" Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, told the *Tribune*. "You report too much crime, then the public will say, 'Wow you have some problems over there.'"

In Philadelphia, officials have tried a number of strategies to try to regain control, the *Inquirer* reports. One is "structured recess," a program in which staff works to curb bullying by taking time usually devoted to lightly structured recess and devoting it to more structured activities.

AP Photo/Carlos Osorio

Push for competitive federal grants worries education policymakers

Many rural states and school districts have been outspoken about what they see as unfairness in the Obama administration's Race to the Top program and other competitive grants. Now some advocates for urban students are saying much the same thing.

Rural educators say many RTTT-endorsed strategies, such as replacing half the instructional staffs in a state's lowest performing schools, are geared more toward urban areas and not sparsely-populated farm communities and Indian reservations, which have problems simply finding enough teachers to fill their schools. Moreover, rural school advocates say the competitive grant system favors bigger jurisdictions that can afford to spend more time and money crafting grant applications.

But while RTT will clearly benefit millions of urban children—for example, the nine states and the District of Columbia that won Round Two of the competition all contain large urban areas—it has left many millions more behind. And that has concerned advocates for urban education.

One state that did not make the list of finalists for Round Two was Connecticut, despite the fact that it has large concentrations of poor children in Hartford and New Haven. In a letter to the state's congressional delegation, State Education Commissioner Mark K. McQuillan said the program could be creating a country of "winners and losers in school reform."

"We now have a country divided into states that are [RTTT] winners and losers, all on the argument that the competition is an effective way to spark innovation and change," McQuillan said in the letter this summer. "As one state that is not in the winners' circle, but with issues of urban poverty that will rival any state's, it's hard for me to see how advantaging some and not all is in the best interest of unity and commonality of purpose."

That opinion was echoed by Thomas Murphy, a Connecticut education department spokesman, who said he was concerned about an Obama administration "blueprint" that seeks to consolidate some funding programs under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and make them competitive grants.

"It appears to be a shift in policy, and we are not sure it's good policy," Murphy told the *New Haven Register.*

Such complaints aren't limited to states that wound up as also-rans in the latest RTTT competition. In July, several groups, including the National Urban League and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, issued a critique of the administration's plans for ESEA reauthorization, the Blueprint for Reform.

"Incentivizing behavior through limited competition, in and of itself, is not a bad strategy, but we must go further to recognize that many states and districts in our union will not compete, either because they do not have the capacity or because they lack the political will," the group said. "This increases the likelihood that better-resourced states and communities will win out. For these reasons, a competitive framework does not go far enough to ensure equity."

Chicago's Richard M. Daley leaves behind urban education legacy

He was part of a Chicago dynasty, a well-oiled political machine assembled by his pugnacious father, the legendary Southside boss. But Richard M. Daley proved to be a different kind of mayor than the man who ruled the Windy City in the 1960s and '70s.

During 22 remarkable years in office, the younger Daley virtually remade downtown Chicago with parks and cultural attractions. He addressed the city's troubled race relations. He attracted major businesses, most notably luring Boeing aircraft from Seattle. And he fixed the schools—or rather, tried to. Because, even as Daley leaves office after his surprise declaration that he would not seek another term, his education legacy is at best unfinished.

"It has been my first priority," Daley said in September at a ribbon-cutting at a dual-language, fine arts academy on the city's Southwest Side, according to the *New York Times*.

That his first priority would meet with such mixed results is testament to the difficulties inherent in fixing big-city school systems. Like other urban mayors who have assumed control of their school districts—among them Michael Bloomberg in New York and Adrian Fenty in Washington, D.C.—Daley discovered that being in control is one thing, turning around decades of underachievement is another.

Perhaps Fenty has been the most successful of the three. Under the direction of his hand-picked schools chancellor, Michelle Rhee, tests scores rose and the teachers submitted to a controversial pay-for-performance plan. But the famously combative Rhee alienated a good part of Fenty's constituency, and last fall the mayor lost the Democratic primary to an opponent on the City Council. A few weeks later, Rhee announced she was leaving after serving just three years.

In New York, Bloomberg and schools Chancellor Joel Klein touted the rapid rise in state test scores in recent years and the high number of schools that had earned the city's "A" rating based on those scores. But for the 2009-10 school year, the state, which had long been accused of making the tests too easy and predictable, reset the passing score at a higher level. Suddenly, New York's successes seemed less valid. For example, just 25 percent of the city's elementary and middle schools received an "A" rating in 2009-10, down from 84 percent the previous year.

Mayor Daley took over the Chicago schools in 1995, and he and Superintendent Arne Duncan—now the Obama administration's Secretary of Education—set off to try to radically reform the district's most troubled schools. Under his Renaissance 2010 plan, Daley closed scores of schools and opened up new ones. Now, about 8 percent of Chicago's students—about 34,000—are enrolled in 92 Renaissance schools, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.

However, districts test scores show that the new schools are doing no better, on average, than regular Chicago schools: with one-third doing better, one-third doing worse, and the rest performing about the same, the *Tribune* reported.

Continued from page 1

serious competitors for local students—and the scarce state aid that accompanies them.

That competition is making itself felt: Today, at least four urban school systems have lost 30 percent or more of their students to charter schools, and 16 districts have lost 20 percent or more. Another 70 or so districts, mostly urban, have lost 10 percent of their students to charters.

What's more, the trend is ever upward: More than 450 charters opened in the past year, siphoning off another 165,000 students from the nation's traditional public schools. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools estimates as many as 400,000 students are on school waiting lists. The demand for a charter school education is far from met.

"Charters are very popular with some parents, for a couple of reasons: One is they like the idea that they can choose where their children go to school," says Jack Jennings, president and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. "Also, charter schools frequently are smaller than regular schools, and sometimes parents feel their children are safer."

Two students share stories about their families and Somali culture and history at the Minnesota International School in Minneapolis, a charter school that enrolls mostly East African students. About 40 students at the middle school are participating in a Kids With Cameras project to collect the stories of their parents and grandparents, their schools and mosques, and their customs and traditions.

Forces at work

Helping fuel the charter school movement today is the active support of President Obama and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who have used the promise of federal funding to encourage states to end legislative limits on the number of charters that can be authorized.

At the same time, the federal government is spurring charter growth with financial resources. In September, it awarded $50 million in grants to help a dozen charter school management groups—such as ASPIRE, Project YES, and the KIPP Foundation—expand by as many as 126 new campuses nationwide. Earlier in the summer it announced $136 million in grants to help state education agencies increase public school options.

State lawmakers, sometimes with encouragement from for-profit school management firms, also have made their support felt. In Ohio, wealthy Akron industrialist David Brennan, whose White Hat Management is the state's largest for-profit charter school operator, has been a major political contributor to political candidates and lobbied for the state charter law. In Louisiana, conservative lawmakers and the business community strongly supported the growth of charter schools in New Orleans, where charters now educate three out of five students.

Big money also is being funneled into charter schools by foundations that are convinced that charter schools are an effective reform model. The Denver-based Charter School Growth Fund, for example, has launched a $160 million fundraising campaign to expand charter school enrollment by another 335,000 students over the next decade. Among the organization's past contributors are such influential groups as the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation.

Some of these organizations also seek to advance their reform strategies by their support of such recent documentaries as "The Lottery" and Waiting for Superman," films that offer an overly simplistic and idealized portrayal of charter schools as promising school reform tools.

Supply and demand

Yet none of this support would matter if students and parents were satisfied with the quality of education—and the safety—of their urban schools. Although national polls show parents generally are happy with the schools their children attend, the harsh reality is that too many urban schools are overwhelmed by the needs of students in high-poverty areas. Test scores are low, and some schools struggle with the behavioral problems of high-needs students.

That often isn't the fault of public school officials, but neither is it unreasonable for parents to seek a better learning environment for their children. And if a charter school appears to offer a smaller, safer, or more academically rigorous opportunity, parents will seize it.

In Camden, for example, Gonzalez was supportive of the public school system, but as a parent, she says, her responsibility was to ensure the best possible education for her child. Thus she opted to leave the city schools for LEAP because the school had a reputation for safety, a stated goal that 100 percent of students would be accepted to a college, and offered a host of support services—on-site health services, family counseling, full-day preschool, student mentoring, parenting classes, and family legal aid.

Urban school leaders could well argue that their districts operate successful magnet and specialty schools with rigorous academic programming, as well as neighborhood elementary schools and comprehensive high schools that are safe and offer extensive wraparound social services for students. There is no doubt that truly excellent schools exist in our nation's urban communities.

But the real issue is one of supply and demand. There simply aren't enough of these schools to meet the needs of families. For example, the School of Science and Engineering at the Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Magnet Center in Dallas is ranked the No.4 high school in the nation by *Newsweek* magazine, but it only

AP Photo/Dawn Villella

In this photo taken last fall, a senior at Houston's YES Prep North Central High School walks past a wall covered with drawings representing different colleges around the country. More than 90 percent of YES Prep students are first-generation college-bound; 80 percent come from low-income families, and 96 percent are Hispanic or African-American. Most students enter the charter school at least one grade level behind in math and English.

enrolls 400 students—out of 160,000 students in the school district. In Camden, the Brimm Medical Arts High School reports above-average test scores and a 100 percent graduation rate, but it only serves 260 students, leaving 2,000 students to attend the city's low-performing comprehensive high schools.

Uneven playing field

These districts have more than one noteworthy school in their rosters, of course, but the bottom line is they cannot possibly meet the demand created by parents looking for a better school. And it is of little concern to parents that charter schools are accused of siphoning off the more academically successful students—and leaving the public schools with those most in need. If anything, that is an incentive to look harder at charters.

And, while no one is suggesting there is a stampede to abandon traditional city schools, the reality is that more parents are "shopping around." A survey by the Pew Charitable Trusts, for example, found that 62 percent of Philadelphia parents with children in district-run schools have actively considered switching to a charter school. That figure rises to 77 percent among parents under the age of 30.

Such attitudes have developed for a variety of reasons: better marketing by charters, the expansion of state laws on school choice and open enrollment, and the policy debate over charters that often promotes these schools as a "silver bullet" for what ails urban education. It also helps that, as more charter schools open, more parents recognize that they have choices.

One irony, of course, is that school leaders know that charter schools are not any more successful than a traditional school. A Stanford University study, for example, found that only 17 percent of charter schools perform significantly better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent produce results that are worse. Other studies also raise questions about the promise of charters.

That's reason enough to view charter schools with caution. But much of the viewpoint of school board members regarding charters is determined by their state legislation. Where school boards are the authorizing agent—and are responsible for issues of accountability—it is far easier to view charter schools in a more favorable light.

In other states, with independent authorizing bodies, school boards too often see lax accountability and oversight of charters. Although many charters are operating adequately, little has been done to weed out the financially mismanaged or academically low-performing schools. It's bad enough to face competition; it's worse when there isn't an even playing field.

There are other irritants for school boards. In Ohio, a sore point is a mandate that school districts provide transportation services to students attending charter schools—an operational and financial burden that districts shoulder to the benefit of their competing charters.

That's money taken out of the hands of schoolchildren, says Amy Reeves Grom, a board member in Akron, Ohio. "The law in Ohio is really skewed toward charters. More money goes to the charters, and it goes to adults and [for-profit] management companies, not the children."

The use of management companies in Ohio has led to "a lot of mismanagement of funds," adds Michelle Francis, a lobbyist for Ohio School Boards Association. Also, the state's charters have a poor record of academics—with 44.5 percent of charter schools labeled as on academic watch or academic emergency, compared to only 1.7 percent of traditional public schools.

"We've seen evidence that, once students actually leave the charter schools and go back to the traditional schools, they're far behind their peers in terms of curriculum and academics," Francis says.

Arizona also has a liberal charter law, with the state board of education and a state board for charter schools authorized to grant charters. This has allowed charter school operators to sidestep any objections from local school policymakers and led to the creation of more than 500 charters statewide.

"I realize this is parental choice and promotes competition and quality," Norma Muñoz, a board member for Arizona's Roosevelt School District 66 and member of the CUBE Steering Committee, said during a workshop on charter schools during CUBE Annual Conference this fall.

"That's fine," she added. "But in

AP Photo/Pat Sullivan

Arizona, it's not equal [competition], because teachers are not required to be certified in a charter, and they're not required to report like public schools. So heaven knows where a charter school will end up."

Taking action

So what does all this mean for the future? For school boards, much depends on the public's perception of their schools, Jennings says. If a city school district has a reputation for low academic performance or its schools are considered unsafe, this will encourage the growth of charter schools in the community—and add to its competition.

"That's the lesson of the District of Columbia, Kansas City, and elsewhere," all cities with growing charter school populations, he says. "Where schools are just bad in general, charter schools are growing."

Certainly school board members need to do more to publicize the academic performance of their better schools, as well as highlight any good news about school safety or rising test scores. But given the challenges that urban education face—and the modest progress seen over the past decade—it's going to be a challenge to counter the sometimes-undeserved positive perception that surrounds charters.

That's not to say school leaders cannot take a more proactive stance. Just as the U.S. Postal Service adapted to the competition of FedEx and UPS by offering new delivery services, urban school districts are responding to the charter movement by responding to parents' interest in more educational choices.

Look to Baltimore, Chicago, Memphis, and Hartford, Conn., to name just a few. There, school officials are pursuing a promising strategy: a "portfolio" of schools. The goal of this strategy is to maximize a district's programming, relying on magnet schools, specialized math or science schools, vocational education centers, all-boy or all-girl schools, and specialty programs for the disabled, incarcerated, or immigrant.

Highlighted in the spring 2010 issue of *Urban Advocate*, the portfolio model aims to leverage the financial resources, specialized talent, and inventory of buildings of an urban school system—all of which far surpasses the resources of even the most well-funded charter school. In theory, this menu of school options should allow a traditional school system to go head-to-head with charter schools.

This approach also has the potential to overcome some of the bureaucratic resistance that hampers reform efforts for troubled campuses, Hartford Superintendent Steven Adamowski told the *American School Board Journal* earlier this year. If parents flock to schools based on their program and reputation, less successful schools are pressured to improve or face restructuring.

If that sounds like the theory behind charters—that the best will serve as examples of innovation, and the worst will be closed—that's intentional. Some school officials are looking for ways to turn charter schools into an asset, including them on websites as one element of the educational choices that districts offer.

Such integration is easier, of course, in states that empower school boards as charter authorizers. There, some school officials talk about co-opting charters into their overall portfolio strategy. One example offered is that, instead of waiting for a group to propose a school that competes with the traditional schools, a school board can put out RFPs to encourage charters to focus on underserved populations—or to take over low-performing, district-run schools that need a fresh start.

What's next?

Such innovative thinking is exactly what urban school policymakers need to be doing. Geoffrey Canada, founder and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, for example, has built a comprehensive network of in-school, afterschool, social-service, health, and community-building programs that incorporate a number of charter schools.

Although there's some debate about the academic performance of these schools, there is validity in his model of enlisting government and private resources to fund wraparound support services and create school support systems that lower the inner-city dropout rate. "In some communities where children have struggled to close the achievement gap and get into college, we need innovation," he says.

Yet it's clear that some school board members are skeptical. At CUBE's Annual Conference, some attendees complained that foundations and other groups are too eager to put money into charter schools while the public schools struggle.

That led to a blunt response from Baltimore City school board member David Stone, who served as a panelist during a workshop on charter schools.

"If you talk to nonprofits, one reason they're drawn to working with charters is they have been stymied at every corner working with the public school system and bureaucracy," he said. "They come to school systems with great ideas then get shuffled around from office to office."

That remark wasn't well received by some. But the bigger issue was hammered home: School boards are going to have to look harder at the impact of charter schools on their communities, identify why parents are turning to them, and seek ways to take the best ideas from charters—and make them their own. And if they want help, they need to work harder at it.

That's happening in Baltimore, which is now giving some of its better-run schools the kind of autonomy enjoyed by charters, Stone said. Meanwhile, school officials also are beginning to hold city schools more accountable for their results—and threatening them with closure, just what, at least in theory, charter schools face.

And that theory is increasingly being tested. The Obama administration has been vocal about demanding more accountability for charters, and several state legislatures are toughening up their rules. Stone suggested urban school leaders should lobby harder for changes to their states' charter laws. "Don't blame the charters. State lawmakers make the law. Go deal with them and get things fixed."

The timing is right, Jennings suggests. "Now that charter schools have been around for awhile, some states are questioning whether they're properly administrated and operated," he says. "Charters probably will grow in numbers, but they probably will come under more government regulation in the years ahead. It only takes a few headlines in the newspapers and media, and state lawmakers will demand accountability."

That certainly will make the competition a little fairer. But urban school boards need to keep working to improve their schools—and to reach out to the families who want more from their city schools, says Roberta Stanley, NSBA's director of federal affairs.

"School boards need to reinvigorate their conversations with parents," she says. "What is it parents want for their children? Whether it's wraparound services or changes in the curriculum, school leaders need to look at whatever else they may change in the school that's better suited to the families they're serving. School boards just need to be more responsive to their constituents."

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Research & Reality

Extra reading class helps struggling students, but gains are temporary

An extra class devoted specifically to improving weak reading skills can improve the academic performance of struggling ninth-graders—but the impact isn't enough to help them catch up academically if their reading skills are significantly below grade level.

What's more, gains in student performance largely disappear in 10th grade if the supplemental reading instruction ends.

These were among the key findings of a large-scale study of supplemental reading classes organized under the federal Enhanced Reading Opportunities (ERO) program.

"It's important for school board members to realize that supplemental reading classes at the beginning of high school can make a difference," says William Corrin, project director of the study. "They can help kids both read better and support them in doing better at school. But it also seems that these courses alone are not the problem-solver for high school students who are notably behind in reading."

Given that 70 percent of ninth-graders score below proficient levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), school leaders might want a look at the study's findings, published in *The Enhanced Reading Opportunities Final Report: The Impact of Supplemental Literacy Courses for Struggling Ninth Graders*.

Approximately 6,000 ninth-graders—chosen because their reading skills were at least two years below grade level—took part in the study. They were randomly assigned to either a year-long supplemental reading course or a regularly scheduled elective. At the end of ninth grade, both groups were assessed using a standardized reading test. Surveys and student records helped determine their reading activities and behaviors—and the impact on their academic performance in the year following the end of supplemental instruction.

The study found:

• Students receiving supplemental reading instruction showed an improvement in reading comprehensive skills, approximately an improvement from the 23rd to the 25th percentile.

• More than three-quarters of these students were still reading two or more years behind grade level at the end of ninth grade.

• Students' academic performance improved in core subject areas, with reports of better grades and credits earned.

• Students scored higher on language arts and math assessments than those in the control group.

• The positive effects of the extra reading class did not appear to carry over to 10th grade. Nor did students show any improvement in their vocabulary or in their reading behaviors.

The change in student performance "seems small, but they shouldn't be disregarded," Corrin says. "A supplemental reading class can make a difference . . . it can help kids both read better and support them in doing better in school."

Although the study offers no policy advice, the findings underscore the learning challenges facing high school students who are allowed to advance through elementary and middle school without adequate reading and writing skills.

The findings also suggest school policymakers cannot assume that a single year of extra help is going to reverse the effects of reading below grade level for years.

Not examined by the study is whether continued interventions would be beneficial, but based on other work he's done, Corrin says, it's an instructional decision would consideration. "It does raise the question about how students transition out of this kind of program. Do you need to have supports continue beyond one year? And if so, what kinds of support?"

If local school boards think it's worth trying, the cost of ongoing interventions might not be as expensive as one might think, he adds. In the study, students attended the extra literacy class instead of an elective.

"The costs are similar to any kind of typical elective," Corrin says. So assigning struggling students to an extra reading class is "not above and beyond the cost of paying for a music, art, or auto mechanics class. You haven't changed your school budget that much."

THE REALITY: SUCCESS DEPENDS ON IMPLEMENTATION

After reading about this study, urban school board leaders might question whether the benefits of a supplemental literacy program are worth the investment. After all, reported student gains were minor—and they didn't last.

But keep in mind the study looked only at two literacy programs—and what happens if schools limit themselves to a temporary intervention with students far below grade level.

School officials could achieve much better (or worse) results depending on the specific course design they implement, suggests Richard Long, director of state and federal relations for the International Reading Association. How well this intervention effort is integrated with students' everyday classroom experiences also is important.

"I've worked with [intervention] programs where we organized the reading and writing with the [everyday] content program, and frankly, you get a pretty good bump" in improved reading, he says. "But you're focused on coordinating their activities and not saying, 'In this class, you do x, and in the other classes, you do y.'"

Also important is to show students how to use their newly learned skills in different classroom situations, Long says. "The type of reading that is needed is so different between a science course and a history course and a literacy course. So unless you are explicitly showing the student how to apply a general skill, you can't assume it is automatically going to happen."

School board members usually don't involve themselves with such instructional details. But, Long says, they can question their professional staff about the level of coordination between supplemental instruction and regular classroom learning.

That ultimately is the bottom line for local policymakers, he says. "Are your supplemental reading programs coordinated—or are they working in isolation, limiting their impact?

2011 CUBE MEETINGS CALENDAR

CUBE Issues Forum & Congressional Luncheon on Capitol Hill

(held in conjunction with NSBA's FRN Conference Feb. 6-8, 2011)

February 5 & February 8, 2011
Hilton Washington Hotel
Washington, DC

CUBE Issues Forum	**February 5, 2011**
CUBE Congressional Luncheon	**February 8, 2011**

CUBE Site Visits & Urban Programming

(held in conjunction with NSBA's Annual Conference April 9-11, 2011)

April 8-10, 2011
Hilton San Francisco
San Francisco, CA

CUBE Site Visit and Conference programming	**April 8-10, 2011**
NSBA Annual Conference Programming	**April 9-11, 2011**

CUBE Issues Seminar

June 23-25, 2011
The Peabody Memphis
Memphis, TN

CUBE Annual Conference and Awards Luncheon

October 6-8, 2011
Loews New Orleans
New Orleans, LA

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