

Cisneros: Education is critical to the nation's future

*Former HUD secretary
speaks of challenges ahead*

In the darkest days of U.S. history—the Civil War—Americans were killing Americans, and the country looked as if it might be torn apart. Yet, despite the immensity of this tragedy, Congress passed the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act, legislation designed to fund a system of colleges and universities across the nation.

What is the point of this historical tidbit? For Henry G. Cisneros, former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the legislation showed the value our nation placed on education even in the midst of war. Lawmakers didn't know when the war would end, or how it would end.

"It was the darkest moment in our history," he said. Yet Congress knew what the nation needed to thrive and prosper: "Education."

The importance of education for our nation's future—and the strategies needed to ensure successful schools—was at the heart of Cisneros' keynote address at the 36th Annual CUBE Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Sept. 30-Oct. 3.

Cisneros's remarks were one of the highlights of the conference, which drew school leaders from across the nation to



Henry Cisneros, former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, makes a point during a wide-ranging speech on the importance of education at the CUBE Annual Conference in San Antonio.

learn more about urban middle schools, extended-day programs, superintendent evaluations, and media relations. Also at the conference, CUBE presented its first Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence to the Boston Public Schools.

No speaker evoked more enthusiasm from urban leaders, however, than Cisneros, who told them that his work as

San Antonio's mayor and chief of HUD made him acutely aware of the importance of good public schools in the cities. Today, as founder and chairman of American City Vista, a partnership that builds residential housing in urban areas, Cisneros said the health and success of a

See Cisneros on page 11

INSIDE

2 CUBE to conduct
school climate survey

6 Boston honored with
CUBE Annual Award

10 'Telling Your Story'
toolkit released

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About CUBE

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban component of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 105 member school boards and the almost 9 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 more than three 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 the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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CUBE to survey districts on school climate

A survey of 24 CUBE member districts will begin this winter to learn more about school climate in urban schools—and to put the spotlight on an important factor in student achievement.

Educators tend to underestimate the importance of school climate as a factor in student achievement, says Warren Hayman, co-chair of CUBE's Urban Student Achievement Task Force, which is sponsoring the project.

"We have found in preliminary studies that, once you understand that there is a problem with your climate and you do something about it, then you see some improvement in student achievement," says Hayman, a school board member in Baltimore County, Md.

Hayman says the survey results should give CUBE member districts a better understanding of how teachers and students perceive their school environment. More information could guide efforts to deal with identified problem areas.

The survey also could overturn the basic assumptions of school officials about what's happening in their schools, says Brian Perkins, who is president of the New Haven (Conn.) school board and chair of the department of educational leadership and policy studies at Southern Connecticut State University.

"If somewhere around 20 percent of

children say they don't feel safe at school, often it's quite a surprise to the administration and teachers," says Perkins, a member of the CUBE Steering Committee.

Perkins, who will assist in administering the CUBE survey, says it's important to give boards and districts more information on school climate and how it influences student achievement.

"You have to take care of some basic needs of children about safety and trust and feeling cared about before you start talking about teaching," he says. "You can't expect children to meet their full potential if you don't address [these] issues."

Similar attention needs to be focused on teachers' attitudes, Perkins says. If administrators want to have effective schools, there must be respect and a sense of trust with the faculty.

CUBE is working to identify districts throughout the nation to participate in the survey. A final report on the findings is scheduled for the fall of 2005.

But Perkins says he hopes to see findings published before the 2005-06 school year begins.

As students return to school, he says, school board members and administrators will be reminded that "climate matters, and we really need to pay attention to how children feel." ■

KAPLAN RETIRING FROM STEERING COMMITTEE

Betsy Kaplan, a member of the Miami-Dade County School Board and the CUBE Steering Committee, will leave office this December after a lengthy career in public service.

Kaplan, who spent 16 years on the Miami-Dade County School Board, has been a member of the CUBE Steering Committee since 1998. Her seat on the committee will be filled by the nominating process, which culminates with elections during the CUBE meeting at the NSBA Annual Conference in April 2005.

A Miami resident since 1934, Kaplan championed arts programs and a broad curriculum during her tenure on the board. She also was one of the leaders in establishing the district's Holocaust curriculum, which is consid-

ered one of the best in the nation.

"This has become my home away from home," Kaplan said when she announced that she was not running again. "Actually, my home is my home away from home."

Kaplan was a member of the Florida School Boards Association's Executive Board from 1988 to 1999 and was chair of NSBA's Federal Relations Network (FRN) in 1996-97. She also served as vice chair of the FRN from 1998 to 2000.

Her wit and sense of humor were evident when she made her announcement that she would not seek another term. "It's time for me to move on," she said. "I really need to get to know my grandchildren before they're all grown and say, 'Who are you?'"

Racial isolation is subtle but felt by immigrants

Segregation is not disappearing over time, professor says

The current wave of immigrants from around the world will influence the degree of racial segregation that is seen in the nation's urban schools. But the impact will vary from city to city, depending upon the income, race, language, and nationality of incoming students

That was the message shared at the CUBE Annual Conference by Katherine O'Regan, an associate professor of public policy at New York University who shared her research on the racial segregation of immigrants in New York City.

A look at the demographics of more than 600,000 immigrant children in the city's elementary and middle schools reveals subtle differences in the racial isolation of students, she said. For example, Chinese immigrants are much more likely to be segregated than students from other Southeast Asian nations. And black immigrants from the Caribbean are more likely to be segregated than immigrants from Africa.

The degree of segregation also varies between native and foreign-born students, O'Regan said. Students from Latin America are less isolated and have more contact with whites than native-born Hispanics, and foreign-born Asians are more segregated from blacks and whites but less segregated from Hispanics as compared to their native-born peers.

Many factors play a role in determining the racial isolation of students, including the tendency of immigrants to cluster together because of shared language and cultural backgrounds. But it is clear that foreign-born students are, on the whole, more racially segregated, and that segregation doesn't disappear over time.

The findings suggest urban school leaders need to pay attention to the particular immigrant populations arriving at their schools, O'Regan said. "Don't think just on racial lines."

O'Regan recommends school board members take a closer look at the specific populations entering their schools.

She also suggests officials would benefit from studying the experiences of school systems whose immigrant population mirrors their own.

"Look at places that look a lot like you," she suggests.

In the same session, Terry Ao, staff attorney for the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, urged urban school boards to prepare themselves for the growing impact of Asian immigrants.

The impact will be particularly hard on programs for non-English speakers, he said. Although urban districts already work with a multitude of languages, many are structured to serve one dominant immigrant group—usually a Spanish-speaking population.

That's going to change, Ao said. More schools will be confronted with a sizable Asian population speaking a variety of languages. Indeed, in four states, Asian languages make up four of the top five languages spoken by non-English-speaking students.

Board members continue conversation on race

An honest discussion about race—and its impact on school board policymaking—can be awkward and difficult, but urban school leaders embraced the task at an evening roundtable discussion during the CUBE annual conference.

"It's a very emotional issue," CUBE Director Katrina Kelley said in opening the two-hour session. Summarizing a previous discussion held earlier this year, she added that "many people took the opportunity to express what were very heartfelt and very deep feelings about serving on a school board, and how race played out in that venue."

Edwin Darden, director of the Center for Urban School Programs at the New York State School Boards Association, told school leaders that there is "a silence on the impact of race, ethnicity, and national origins—and how it intersects with policy and policymakers."

Harry Garewal, vice chair of the CUBE Steering Committee and a board member in the Phoenix (Ariz.) Union High School District, said he believes everyone has a set of biases and prejudices, whether they like to admit to it or not.

"We have to understand that we have those prejudices, and they have an impact on the discussions we have at the local level," he said. "Sometimes we set policy

Ao also advises school officials to avoid putting Asian students into a catchall category in their data collection efforts. In addition to language differences, Asian students come from all walks of life—and they are not immune to the problems of poverty or a troubled family.

The reality is that many Asian students are being left behind educationally. According to material shared by Ao, half of all Laotians, Cambodians, and Hmong 25 years or older have had no schooling—or failed to earn a high school diploma.

So school officials need to look closely at their Asian populations, their needs, and the educational strategies that will help them succeed academically.

"Make sure proper data is collected. Asians are often thrown into the 'other' category, and it's most important that we have information broken down by ages and subgroups, so we can address these different groups. Having overall 'Asian' data is unacceptable." ■

based on that, on those beliefs, on those biases, and that's why we're having this conversation today."

As the conversation continued, a number of board members spoke up about their experiences. One board member recalled various discussions over the years about race "behind the scenes" but no public debate of the issue. Another talked about a school board that passed on an excellent superintendent candidate because the community wanted a minority as schools chief.

Some members reported that their boards had discussed racial tensions in the community, and one talked about how mandatory diversity training had been implemented in his district.

Others spoke of concerns that their boards and teaching staffs were predominantly white, while the student population was overwhelming minority. One board member noted that minority members could find their voices ignored by the majority, particularly when minorities are underrepresented on the board.

Attendees expressed a strong desire to define practical steps to tackle the issue of race and school board service. It was agreed that CUBE should continue the dialogue.

"It's a good thing for people to talk about race," Darden said. "Only good things can happen." ■

Health experts: Time is now to focus on obesity

As the nation focuses increasing attention on the issue of childhood obesity, there's a good reason for urban school leaders to join in efforts to solve this worrisome health problem: Schools are where the children are.

"What are schools going to do about childhood obesity?" asked Brenda Greene, NSBA's director of school health programs, in introducing a conference session on school fitness practices.

According to Mary McKenna, a health scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who spoke at the session, the percentage of overweight students has mushroomed in the past two decades. In Arkansas, officials report that 30 percent of incoming kindergartners are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Many factors—from more processed foods in students' diets to more sedentary lifestyles—have contributed to the obesity problem, she said. In the schools, one contributing factor can be found in some cafeteria offerings and the prevalence of vending machines selling soft drinks and unhealthy snacks.

"When children are given a bad choice, they make the less healthy choice," McKenna said.

School boards can take a positive step by insisting on a healthier menu in school cafeterias and putting healthier snacks, juices, and bottled water in vending machines. "Students will buy and eat healthy foods and drinks," McKenna said.

And schools can still make money doing so—an important consideration for those who rely on vending machine revenues to bolster tight budgets, she said. In one study she cited, at least a dozen schools reported an increase in food sales after switching to healthier fare.

Another speaker, Carey Dabney, an officer with the Texas Action for Healthy Kids Alliance and the Austin Independent School District's school health advisory committee, told urban leaders that more and more local and state officials are taking this issue seriously.

With good reason: Obesity among its citizens is costing Texas an estimated \$10 billion annually, and if current trends continue, the cost will rise to \$40 billion by 2040.

"We know there's clearly not enough money in any state to properly fund edu-

cation," she said. "So if we have to spend tax dollars to deal with health problems, there'll be less and less money available ... and public education will have a harder time."

Monetary savings aren't the only benefit that school officials will see from healthier students, Dabney said. According to research, schools also will see an improvement in attendance, better student concentration and learning, and fewer disciplinary problems.

In Texas, state officials have implemented a number of nutrition and physical activity programs to improve student health, she said. One 2001 mandate is for schools to create school health advisory councils, appointed by the school board to identify student needs and advise school

boards on solutions.

One of the great strengths of these advisory councils is that they put the spotlight on student health needs and help educate everyone in the school system—from parents to the school board—about the issues, Dabney said.

In Austin, school officials have hired a nutrition specialist to help design healthier school lunches, and cafeterias are being renovated, she said. High-fat snacks are being eliminated in favor of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The school system also is committed to regular physical activity for students—and is working to support elementary teachers who have little training and limited equipment and are pressured by demands to boost academic achievement. ■

Funding shortfalls hurt implementation of NCLB, IDEA

Increases not keeping up with need, Resnick says

The federal government must boost funding for public education—and make improvements to the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

That is the message that NSBA is sending to Capitol Hill and the White House, Michael A. Resnick, NSBA's associate executive director of advocacy and issues management, told urban school leaders at their annual conference in San Antonio.

Despite political rhetoric that education spending is on the rise, the reality is that increases are not keeping up with the need—and are not even as high as the federal government originally promised. For example, Congress authorized an increase of \$68.5 billion in Title I money for the fiscal 2002-05 budgets but only appropriated an increase of \$47.7 billion.

A similar shortfall can be found in IDEA funding. When Congress passed the landmark legislation, it promised to pay 40 percent of the cost of the mandate—but the government will never reach this level of spending with current funding increases.

Such shortfalls are putting a great strain on local budgets, Resnick said.

He urged urban school leaders to join

NSBA's advocacy efforts and talk to their members of Congress. "Tell members of Congress what the shortfall means to you," he said. "Tell them the results of not having sufficient money."

At the same time, NSBA will continue to lobby federal officials about needed changes in the language of NCLB and IDEA, Resnick said.

Under current NCLB rules, for example, a school can be identified as in need of improvement if only a single subgroup of students fails to reach its adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals—even if the school as a whole is doing well, he said.

As *Urban Advocate* went to press, it was unclear whether Congress would complete its work on IDEA before it adjourned for the year. But Resnick told school leaders that NSBA was encouraging lawmakers to approve a final bill.

Finally, Resnick offered an update on NSBA's work in helping local school districts prepare a lawsuit against the U.S. Health and Human Services Department regarding rules that make it harder for schools to collect billions of dollars in Medicaid reimbursements for services provided to students with disabilities.

It does little good for the federal government to say it's boosting education funding, he said, if HHS is going to deprive schools of Medicaid money. ■

One key to closing the gap: Extend the school day

Panel calls for expanded before- and after-school effort to boost instruction

As any urban school board member knows, some children need more time to learn—or have more to learn if they hope to catch up with their high-performing peers. So shouldn't urban school boards make sure they get that extra time?

"Children's minds don't stop at 3:30 when the school bell rings, and our schools shouldn't stop teaching them," Terry Peterson, director of the National Afterschool and Community Learning Network, told school leaders during a CUBE conference session on extended-day programs.

The demand for additional instructional time for students is greater than ever, he said. Academic programs are increasingly rigorous, the need for an educated, technically savvy workforce is great, and there is a sizable population of disadvantaged students who are academically far behind their more successful peers.

That's especially true in urban school districts, where large numbers of students are coming to school with fewer words in their vocabularies, fewer social skills, and fewer math skills, Peterson said. Although

these students can learn at the same pace as more advanced students, they never seem to have enough time to close the achievement gap.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that low-income students lose two to three months of academic learning over the summer, he said. By 12th grade, they

achieving students need, he said. And that makes a lot of sense. If a community is going to invest in a school building, computers, libraries, and laboratories, why keep these facilities closed for 80 percent of the week?

One advantage of keeping schools open is that it builds public support for the

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Children's minds don't stop at 3:30 when the school bell rings, and our schools shouldn't stop teaching them.

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can fall behind as much as two or three grades behind more affluent students.

"For many students, time is not on their side," Peterson said.

Summer school can help these students, but Peterson warned that such programs are worthwhile only if children are given enough time to make real progress. "You can't run a two to four-week program for only a few hours a day," he said

Already, schools are relying more and more on before- and after-school programs to provide the extra instruction low-

schools, particularly if community groups are invited to support these programs. Some school districts are designing new buildings to serve as community centers that can stay open longer hours.

"When a group or individual gets personally involved in after-school or summer school programs, then those people have more buy-in to public education," Peterson said.

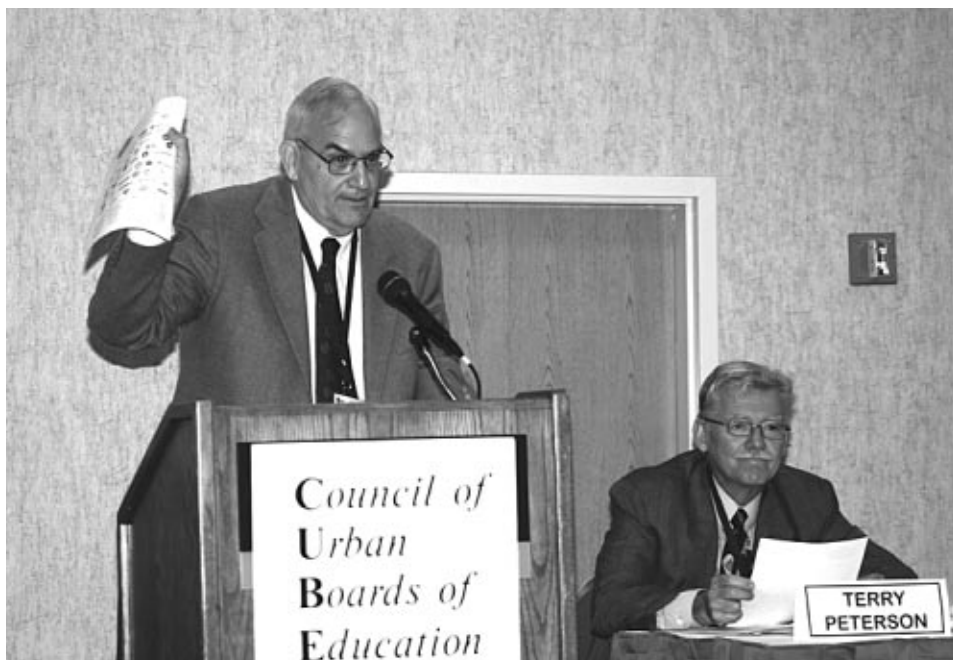
"Because taxpayers and citizens see their schools used more effectively ... it gives you a framework for additional learning time [for students] and building partnerships."

Urban school systems also can look to state and federal grants, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, to support their efforts, said Dick Roberts, a field coordinator with the Los Angeles Unified School District. The district used \$100 million in such grants to help fund after-school programs in more than 200 schools.

All told, the district has after-school programs in 540 elementary schools, plus programs in many middle and high schools. These programs provide students with reading and math tutoring, classes for students learning English, health services, recreational activities, enrichment opportunities, and more.

Community groups that partner with the schools operate many programs, Roberts said.

"It's not going to happen if it's left to school districts alone," he said. "You have to be willing to sit down and talk [to community groups]." ■



Dick Roberts, a field coordinator with the Los Angeles Unified School District, makes a point during a panel session on extended-day programs. Roberts was joined on the panel by Terry Peterson (right) and Mary Marks (not pictured) of the Anchorage (Alaska) school board.

Boston honored with CUBE Award for Urban School Board Excellence



The first annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence was presented to the Boston Public Schools at the CUBE Annual Banquet.

"Tonight is about excellence; it's about hard work," NSBA Executive Director Anne L. Bryant told urban school leaders at the onset of the awards ceremony. "It's about alignment and collaboration, more hard work, realignment, reaching out to the community ... and continually asking how we can improve."

Every school district considered for the CUBE award demonstrated some of these strengths, she said. "But the Boston Public Schools' star shone just a little bit brighter. Our goal, of course, is to create a galaxy of stars, and to have an entire sky that has a healthy glow."

The CUBE award was inaugurated to recognize outstanding urban school districts that demonstrate excellence in four core areas: board governance, closing the achievement gap, academic achievement, and community engagement. The award is sponsored by McGraw-Hill Education.

Also honored at the banquet were California's Chula Vista Elementary School District and Virginia's Norfolk Public Schools, both of which were awarded honorable mentions. Fourteen CUBE districts competed for the first-ever award.

"What struck me about all three districts is their laser-like focus on student learning," Bryant told banquet attendees. "It was clear from their goals, the agendas they set, that they set out to close the achievement gap. They set out to engage



Top left: A group picture for the winners. Pictured (from left) are NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant, McGraw-Hill's Dan Domenech, Boston School Committee Chair Elizabeth Reiling, NSBA Board President George McShan, and Boston Superintendent Thomas Payzant. Right: Chula Vista's Patrick A. Judd talks about his district's accomplishments during his acceptance speech. Bottom: Norfolk's Lillian P. Wright speaks with Payzant after the banquet.

the community for all children."

As the winning district, Boston will receive a \$5,000 contribution to its student scholarship fund.

Strategic plan cited

Before the banquet, CUBE Steering Committee Chair David L. Thomas Jr. called Boston's school committee "an excellent example of the best in urban

public school governance."

"The Boston School Committee leadership has been critical to raising student achievement, narrowing the achievement gap, and bringing the community together in support of Boston's public schools," said Thomas, a member of the Mobile County, Ala., school board.

Award judges cited Boston for its long-range strategic plan, Focus on Children,

which was developed with heavy community input. The school committee also was noted for moving aggressively to improve academic achievement by investing in smaller class sizes, approving a new student promotion policy, and developing a new accountability system to measure school and student progress.

Boston School Committee Chair Elizabeth Reilinger expressed her appreciation for the award and said she hoped it would serve as an opportunity to spotlight improvements in urban education.

In describing her school system's success, she noted the importance of Boston's strategic plan and the issue of stability in policy direction. "Education reform does not happen overnight," she said. "It's incredibly important to be able to put a plan in place, to actually execute that plan, and to stay that course."

Children come first

Speaking on behalf of the Chula Vista Elementary School District, board Vice Chair Patrick A. Judd told urban school leaders that his district's success also could be attributed to stability in leadership—a number of board members have served a dozen or more years. This has helped provide continuity to the district's direction.

Also important were decisions that focused "on what the children need," he said. "The children have to have the first dollars we spend."

Norfolk school board member Lillian P. Wright told urban leaders that her school system hasn't always "been where we are today," but its current success can be attributed to commitment.

"We made the decision to be accountable for the achievement of all of our students, and we mean all," she said. "That is our mantra. That is our mission. And everything we do ... everything is focused on all of our children."

Dan Domenech, senior vice president of national urban markets at McGraw-Hill, also congratulated the Boston School committee and the other finalists.

"All are stellar examples of school boards that have made important decisions that have improved student achievement in their districts," he said.

Arnie Fege, director of public engagement for the Public Education Network and one of the award judges, called the award "critically important" for urban education. He said the panel of judges was "tremendously impressed" with the quality of the 14 applications it reviewed. ■

Students serenade conference-goers



Two of the staples of the CUBE Annual Conference are a reception following the first day of meetings and performances by students from the host district. Top: CUBE members unwind and listen to a performance by the Irving Middle School mariachi group. Above: Students from Irving Middle showcase their skills on the violin during the 30-minute performance. Two other San Antonio groups—the Austin Academy mariachi group and the Mann Academy jazz band—also performed during the sessions. Austin Academy students played prior to the Henry Cisneros general session, while the jazz group entertained participants at the CUBE Annual Banquet.

Site visit showcases schools-within-schools model

Smaller learning environments lead to success in San Antonio

The schools-within-a-schools model has proven highly successful in San Antonio high schools, allowing local educators to boost student achievement and better meet the needs of teenage students.

That was the message offered by San Antonio officials who gave urban school leaders a tour of their schools as part of CUBE's annual conference.

In a site visit focusing on the city's high school program, CUBE members learned that student achievement has risen considerably at Thomas A. Edison High School since it created four smaller learning environments. Ninety-nine percent of the school's 11th-graders, for example, passed last year's state social studies exit exam.

Each of Edison's in-house schools enrolls approximately 450 to 500 students, Principal Charles Munoz said. Each school is supervised by an assistant principal and staffed with a campus instructional coordinator (CIC), a counselor, and 12 teachers who provide instruction in core academic courses.

This structure allows each school to operate independently and links students to the same cadre of administrators, counselors, and teachers for their four years of high school, Munoz said. Because of this long-term relationship, staff members get to know students, and it puts accountability for each student's success squarely on a small instructional team," he noted.

Key to this model's success is the assignment of a campus instructional coordinator to each small school, he said. CICs meet weekly with teachers to talk about instruction, classroom planning, and grading practices. They also work with teachers to monitor student learning and analyze test data to identify students in trouble.

Because CICs do not hold a supervisory role, their presence in the classroom is nonthreatening and welcomed by teachers, Munoz said.

"They coach the teachers. When I walk into the classroom, it is an evaluation," he said. When the CICs walk into the classroom, they're there to help the teachers."

One noteworthy program at Edison is



CUBE Steering Committee member Lock P. Beachum Sr. of Youngstown, Ohio, smiles as he talks to a student from San Antonio's Fox Academic and Technical High School. Middle row: San Antonio Assistant Superintendent Sylvia De La Pena and Edison High School Principal Charles Munoz talk to CUBE members. Below: Nancy Broner of the Duval County (Fla.) school board talks to a Fox Tech student during the site visit.



NovaNET, an Internet-based, interactive instructional program that allows students to complete courses they've failed, Munoz said.

The program is more rigorous than it sounds, he said, and it gives struggling students an opportunity to recover lost credits, reduces the likelihood of students dropping out, and increases the graduation rate.

Unlike some schools-within-a-school models, Edison does not organize its smaller schools into academic themes. All four schools following the district curriculum, although students can enroll in special interest and magnet programs offered as building wide electives.

The same model is used at Louis W. Fox Academic and Technical High School (Fox Tech), where Principal Nancy York told urban school leaders that this approach avoids the possibility of high-achieving students migrating to a specific small school because of its unique program—and inadvertently leading to the isolation of lower-achieving students. All students are assigned randomly among the smaller schools.

No one is complaining about the results. In the 1990s, the school had the highest dropout rate in the state and the lowest daily attendance in the city—and the Texas Education Agency ordered the school closed and reorganized.

Today, the school has a dropout rate almost 1/10th the rate of a decade ago, York said. Daily attendance is at 95 percent, and the school boasts its highest graduation rate in 20 years—with 60 percent of graduates going on to college.

Part of this success can be attributed to the school's commitment to regular teacher training, a constant review of instructional methods, and a close watch on student data, York said. Every Thursday, teachers participate in department, small school, or school wide meetings, and York meets weekly with each school's assistant principals, CIC, and department heads to review progress.

The school-within-a-school model works well, York said she told school leaders. "We feel we have an infrastructure of support for student success ... to bolster students' personal growth. You can do that if you know those students. Also, we can tell students, 'You can't fool me. I know you.'"

Other attendees visited Edgar Allen Poe Middle School, which features single gender classrooms, and Pfeiffer Academy, a pre-K through 8 charter school. ■

Session looks at ways to avoid middle grades 'mush'

If schools can safely transport millions of students daily, feed them nutritious meals, and ensure the availability of classrooms, supplies, and teachers, "one cannot help but wonder why school systems have so much difficulty in educating students between the ages of 12 and 15 years old."

This observation by Hayes Mizell, distinguished senior fellow at the National Staff Development Council, opened a session for conference attendees about middle schools and what he called the "perennial dissatisfaction in how these schools educate young adolescents."

Educators first began looking differently at middle-grade students after the turn of the century, and by the 1980s, the nation largely had settled upon a middle school configuration of grades 5-8 or 6-8, he said. The rationale for this configuration was that young adolescents required schools that were designed to serve their unique emotional and interpersonal needs.

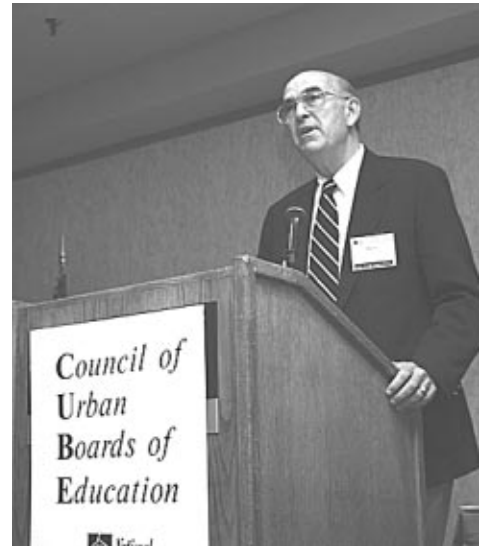
But by the late 1980s, Mizell said, test scores and other measures made it clear that the students' academic needs were not being met, which raised questions about the schools' academic rigor and educational feasibility.

Yet, he said, if middle schools have not been as academically successful as they should have been, part of the problem is that school boards and superintendents have not had a sound philosophy on how to educate young adolescents.

Mizell said boards and superintendents failed to provide principals and teachers with clear outcomes of what these schools should achieve. They never came to grips with how these schools should be organized and operated, and they paid little attention to such crucial middle school concepts as team teaching, integrated curricula, common planning time for teachers, or the need for regular professional development.

As a result, "middle school principals and teachers did the best they could, drawing on what pieces they could understand of the middle school concept," he said. "But this often produced a mush of policies ... The academic mission took a back seat to dealing with students' social and emotional needs."

To improve matters, hundreds of middle school educators organized the



Hayes Mizell of the National Staff Development Council speaks during a session on middle schools.

National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform in 1997. The forum hosts a website highlighting dozens of successful middle schools whose programs are "academically excellent, developmentally appropriate, and socially equitable"—and well worth a look by urban school leaders seeking successful models to guide their reform efforts, Mizell noted.

Some school systems, however, have decided that radical reform is necessary, and in cities like New Orleans, New York City, and Philadelphia, efforts are under way to reorganize the middle grades into K-8 school configurations. The hope is to create smaller learning environments and encourage more parental involvement.

It's a strategy that might work, but Mizell said many urban middle schools are successful, and they deserve the continued support of their local boards.

But, as is true for all schools, a middle school will succeed only if the board and central office provide adequate financial support, hire high-quality teachers, support extensive staff development, and set forth a clear mission for the school, he said.

"Some think K-8 schools will solve many problems," Hayes said. "But school boards and superintendents should know that a wholesale conversion to a K-8 system is not a matter of 'set it in place and forget it.' Under any grade configuration, [success] is going to take hard work." ■

'Telling Your Story' toolkit released

Publication focuses on improving communications

A television reporter leaves you a message that he wants to talk about a school program you know very well, but you're too busy to return his call. Then you see the report on the evening news, and the portrayal of the program is all wrong.

Lesson to be learned: If you don't tell your story, somebody else will—and you probably won't like it very much.

That was the first of many lessons shared at a conference session introducing the new publication, *Telling Your Story: A Toolkit for Marketing Urban Education*, a project of the CUBE Communications Task Force.

Denise Brodsky, a CUBE Steering Committee member and trustee in the Clark County (Nev.) School District, spoke about the power of branding. She said branding "paints the picture of what we are and provides people with the image we want to project to them."

If anyone doubts the value of branding, think about the brand names of commercial products that are instantly recognizable. The brand that urban school districts want to sell to the community focuses on

student achievement, Brodsky said. So, on your website and in all material you send home with children, you want to build your brand and "project the image you want to project."

Jimmy Fahrenholtz, a board member in New Orleans, told school leaders that districts need a proactive, strategic plan to market an image of the schools. He noted that the district must be "transparent" in all of its communications, both internal and external.

One thing school officials don't want to do is wait until controversy or bad news turns the media and public's attention on the schools, Brodsky said. "Defensiveness never sells anything."

If the media are portraying the schools in a negative light, one reason could be that

school officials haven't built a working relationship—and trust—with local reporters, she said.

That's not to say that the media will stop covering negative stories about the school system, but if they respect you—and you're available to answer their questions—you've a better chance of getting across your side of the story.

But school officials don't need to rely on the media to provide the public with



an image of your schools, Brodsky said. Use your newsletters to get across your message. Form partnerships with the local public television station. Put information in the hands of the chamber of commerce and civic groups.

Finally, Fahrenholtz said, put together a professional communications team to oversee the school system's public relations effort. It is far too important to put in the hands of a retired administrator or overworked school principal.

Willetta Milam, a member of the Cleveland, Ohio, school board, reviewed two communications crises the district faced—changes in bus routes and a \$100 million budget cut—last year.

Communication was so critical to engage the community and keep members informed. "If we hadn't," she said, "who knows what kind of mess we would have had?" ■

BRIEFLY NOTED

- The CUBE Issues Forum will be held from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 29 as part of NSBA's Federal Relations Network Conference. FRN runs Jan. 30 and Feb. 1. All meetings will be at the Grand Hyatt Washington Hotel in Washington, D.C.

- Copies of CUBE's documentary commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, "Renewing the Promise," have been sent to each CUBE member district. Additional copies of the documentary and resource guide are available by calling (703) 838-6705 or sending an e-mail to cube@nsba.org.

- CUBE has collected more than two dozen urban superintendent evaluation instruments for the district workshop session held at the CUBE Annual Conference. Copies are available to CUBE members. Please call 703-838-6705 or email cube@nsba.org for more information.

- Photos from the CUBE Annual Conference will be available for purchase from ofoto.com. Conference attendees will receive an e-mail in the near future with directions on how to sign in and buy photos.

TOOLKIT FOCUSES ON 'NUTS AND BOLTS'

Telling Your Story: A Toolkit for Marketing Urban Education offers some nuts-and-bolts suggestions that urban school boards—working with the superintendent and district communications team—can put to work to influence media coverage and public perceptions about their school system.

Written by Nora Carr, a school public relations professional and frequent CUBE presenter, this publication draws on the expertise of numerous communications professionals from urban school districts.

The goal is to help urban school leaders do a better job of telling their district's story, of how they are working

to help all children succeed.

In the toolkit, school board members will find advice on how to:

- build a positive public image of your school system;
- develop proactive media relations;
- overcome marketing challenges;
- train staff in dealing with the media;
- respond to negative news; and
- start a public relations program.

Copies of the toolkit have been mailed to all CUBE member districts and communications staff.

Additional copies can be downloaded free from CUBE at www.nsba.org/cube.

CISNEROS

Continued from page 1

city is intimately linked to the health and success of its public schools.

"If you don't address yourself to the question of schools, all your ambitions for the city cannot be addressed," he said. "You cannot build new neighborhoods. You can't persuade industries to come back. You can't create the conditions of urban progress."

Early in his remarks, Cisneros acknowledged what every urban school leader already knew: that public education truly makes America the land of opportunity—a unique corner of the world where social and economic class is not a barrier to upward mobility.

"This is a country where children born in Appalachia or the Mississippi Delta or the inner city can become anything they want to be: an astronaut, university professor, researcher, doctor, governor, or president," he said. "It is possible. No other country can say that."

The role of schools in providing upward mobility will become all the more important as the nation's minority population continues to grow, Cisneros warned. Failure to educate this population and turn minority students into productive workers and citizens will be a serious blow to our economy and democracy.

"I wish more Americans ... could understand the significance of the schools in this process of American diversity ... to create the future we want," he said.

At least urban school leaders understand—and work to make public education a valuable tool in building the nation's future, Cisneros said. Although some critics advocate a future of vouchers and charter schools, "thank goodness there are people like you in this room who fight for the public schools."

For urban school leaders, that fight focuses largely on the task of improving the quality of urban education—and Cisneros took time to review the ingredients of successful schools.

The first ingredient to success, he said, is political unity and a common, goal-oriented vision of where a school system should be going. Petty political squabbles that divide some school boards have no place. And school leaders must not allow people to put their political interests or ambitions ahead of the needs of children.

"That means school boards must work through the political issues and make a mechanism for a consensus on goals that



Henry Cisneros (right) shakes hands with CUBE Steering Committee member Lock P. Beachum Sr. (back to camera) while David Thomas, chair of the CUBE Steering Committee, looks on.

last—and are not changing with every fashion ... every election," Cisneros said. "If you cannot create political unity, a sense of consistency, a commitment to excellence, and a unified board and qualified superintendent, the school district doesn't stand a chance."

Cisneros said the success of urban education also depends on a quality school environment: smaller class sizes, technology, modern science labs, and a good school facility. "You cannot ask children to aspire for better," he said, "if everything around them is eroding, falling apart."

Greater parental involvement also is needed, Cisneros said, noting that getting it presents a host of challenges for urban districts.

Still, he said, "It's critical to make parents welcome. Learning cannot occur in the four walls of the school if it doesn't continue in the home. Parents must turn off the TV. They must ask if homework is done. They must try to assist."

Parental involvement won't happen, however, without a commitment by the board, Cisneros said. For too many teachers and principals, reaching out to parents is difficult, time consuming, and viewed as yet another task on top of their already heavy workload. "So it falls on the governance of the schools to establish an ethic that we value the importance of parents."

Essential to the success of urban schools is the ability of school leaders to hire the best possible principals, he said. "I can walk onto a school campus and tell you almost in five minutes what kind of

principal is running the place."

"There's nothing you can do to advance your goals without good people in the system, and to me, it starts with the principals."

The final ingredient for urban school success is the quality of teachers, he said. No one works harder or is more dedicated to the children. "They deserve every bit of our support and the very maximum compensation we can provide," Cisneros said.

Putting these ingredients to work in urban schools will produce success, Cisneros said. It's already been proven in schools across the nation.

And urban school leaders should act now. No one is going to send his or her children to urban schools if they do not offer a good academic program, are potentially violent, or are poorly run. And, given the dropout rate in so many urban schools, "how can we ask middle class parents with ambitions for their children to stay?"

"We need to regain trust in America's institutions ... especially the schools," he said. "We spend more per capita on K-12 than any other nation in the world, but our high school graduation rate ranks 10th behind Korea, behind the Czech Republic, and behind Norway and Japan. We spend the money, but we're not getting the [results]."

It's a challenge that must be met if America is to prosper in the years ahead, Cisneros said. "It goes to the heart of our nation's future. It goes to the heart of our very values ... It goes to the heart of this nation's dreams and promises." ■

2005 CUBE CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CUBE Issues Forum

January 29, 2005,
2:00-5:00 p.m.
Grand Hyatt Hotel
Washington, DC

(Held in conjunction with NSBA's Federal Relations Network Conference, January 30-February 1)

CUBE Site Visit and Urban Programming

April 14-17, 2005
Manchester Grand Hyatt
San Diego, CA

(Held in conjunction with NSBA Annual Conference & Exposition, April 16-19)

CUBE Issues Seminar

June 24-26, 2005
Boston, MA

CUBE 37th Annual Conference
September 29-October 2, 2005
Las Vegas, NV

For more information, visit www.nsba.org/cube or email cube@nsba.org.

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