

## Poverty and Reform: A Volatile Mix

*Vexing issues pose huge challenges for urban districts, school boards*

By Del Stover

After decades of negative publicity and mixed success in educating students, urban education is seeing expectations rise. More cities are showing real progress in boosting student performance as the standards movement puts unprecedented importance on that progress.

But can this hard-earned progress be sustained? Or will gains in academic performance eventually stall, particularly in schools serving the most impoverished students?

Only time will tell. But Al Oertwig, a school board member in St. Paul, Minn., worries that urban schools will find it exceedingly difficult to overcome the immense obstacles that poverty places in the way of student learning. No matter how successful urban schools are, he says, some students will continue to fail, and that may well clash with public expectations.

"In the next five years, we're going to have a major policy debate about what are the solutions to urban education," he says.

"I can't predict what the outcome of that debate will be. But it's pretty clear that debate is going to happen."

The stakes will be high for urban education. If test scores begin to lag, critics of public education undoubtedly will cry louder for voucher programs and other market-based reform strategies. Pressure will mount for more mayoral or state takeovers, and lawmakers could prove more reluctant to invest in districts viewed as falling short.

And let's not forget the students. Any failure to advance student performance will translate into tens of thousands of young people who fail to graduate from high school or who fall short in the academic skills they need for successful adulthood. The promise of many young lives may be tragically diminished.

The ultimate danger is that "we create a permanent underclass if we don't address the issues of poverty," says Detroit Deputy Mayor Anthony Adams, former general counsel for the Detroit Public Schools. "A tremendous segment of our population will be left without hope."

With these concerns in mind, some argue that it's time for urban school leaders to look anew at poverty's impact on student learning—and what more schools can do to help poor students catch up academically. "Poverty has got to be on



Poverty is an obstacle to learning, but it's important to remember that not all urban students are poor—and that coming from a low-income home doesn't mean that a child cannot be academically successful. Here, a sophomore in Wichita, Kan., prepares for the Kansas Science Olympiad, a clear example that urban school districts can offer a world-class education.

the table," says economist and author Julianne Malveaux, who spoke to CUBE members at NSBA's Annual Conference in Chicago.

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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 108 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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## Safety, community connections to be focus of CUBE's June Issues Forum in Chicago

Urban schools are a safe haven for schoolchildren. But, in a society where violence is no stranger, school boards have to be eternally vigilant—and stay atop of the latest in school safety policies and procedures.

So join CUBE for its 2006 Issues Forum—titled “Connecting with Communities to Create Safe Urban Schools”—at the Renaissance Chicago Hotel in Chicago, June 23-25. Districts should consider sending the superintendent, principals, teachers, school counselors and other students services personnel to the forum as well.

On this summer's agenda:

### Friday, June 23

- **Keynote Speaker: Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith**—Don't miss this opinionated presentation by the author of *The Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents and Deadly Consequences*.

- **Creating Districtwide Prevention and Intervention Policies**—Find out which district prevention policies and strategies are critical to the safety of students and staff members.

- **Fostering and Sustaining School-Law Enforcement Partnerships**—Learn more about community policing and school effectiveness, as well as how to develop, sustain, and fund school-law enforcement partnerships.

- **Developing School Board Policies and Legal Issues To Support Safe Schools**—Study the guiding principles involved in developing and implementing board policies that support safe schools.

- **Involving the Community in Gang Prevention**—Hear more on school policies to address gang-related activity and on the importance of starting gang-prevention programs as early as the elementary school level.

- **Bringing Juvenile Offenders Back into the Classroom**—Learn how districts are helping troubled students successfully reenter the school culture.

- **Racial Isolation Task Force Meeting—Disparities in Discipline: What Can We Do?**—Join this frank discussion on how urban school boards can confront racial inequities in school discipline.



Chicago's Buckingham Fountain

### Saturday, June 24

- **District Workshops: Crisis Communications Plan**—Take part in a lively discussion with fellow board members about what's worked—and what hasn't—when school districts must deal with the community rumors that follow a violent incident.

- **Viewing the Classroom as a Community**—Learn why school boards must enlist students and parents as partners in school safety programs.

- **Community Perceptions and Media Reporting of Youth Violence**—Discover techniques to help the community and media get past the initial shock of an incident and bring them together to become a part of the solution.

- **Helping Students Afflicted by Fear**—Join this session to learn about policies that combat bullying, harassment, and discrimination—and hear why prevention training is so important for students, teachers, and staff.

- **Zero Tolerance**—Zero tolerance policies have come under criticism in recent years. Learn why—and how—your schools can make your existing policies even more effective.

### Sunday, June 25

- **Governance and Training Task Force Meeting**

- **Closing Keynote address** ■

## Perkins, Corona to serve as CUBE chair, vice chair

**B**rian Perkins of New Haven, Conn., and Steve Corona of Fort Wayne, Ind., reelected as chair and vice chair of the CUBE Steering Committee during the organization's annual business meeting in Chicago.

Perkins was one of three Steering Committee members were reelected to three-year terms. The others were Christene Moss of Fort Worth, Texas, and David Tokofsky of Los Angeles.

New Steering Committee members elected to three-year terms are Vilma Leake of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and Evelyn Shapiro of Isaac School District No. 5 in Phoenix, Ariz.

## Malveaux: Make education a priority

**I**f the nation has the political will and wealth to pay for such things as brand-new baseball stadiums, there should be enough determination and money to provide America's children with a high-quality education.

So argued economist Julianne Malveaux, who as keynote speaker offered one of the most dynamic messages to urban school leaders during the five days of CUBE programming at NSBA's 66th Annual Conference and Exposition in Chicago.

"We have state-of-the-art jails," she complained. "Why don't we have state-of-the-art schools?"

For too long, Malveaux said, educators have accepted the notion of "going along to get along" and allowed others to drive the political agenda on education. That has to end. It's time, she insists, for school board members to take on this battle—and do whatever it takes to improve education. "If you don't have the passion, no one will. It's on you. You must become zealots."

Malveaux had harsh words for President Bush's budget priorities, which she argues "show no regard for the president's call to make the United States more globally competitive. How can the president call for globalization and fail to provide funding to support foreign language studies?"

Noting the serious social and economic



Julianne Malveaux

challenges facing the nation, Malveaux urged school board members to have the "audacity" to demand more support for education. "We must fix the public schools, and when we fix education, we fix everything else," she said.

## Site visits offer glimpse of Chicago's best schools

**A** visit to a highly successful program that prepares special-needs students for adult life and the workplace was on the agenda for urban school board members who participated in CUBE's pre-conference site visits of Chicago schools.

The school, Chicago's Northside Learning Center, serves students ages 14 to 21 with moderate cognitive disabilities, school representatives told visiting board members. The goal, they said, is to prepare young people to be as independent as possible and productive members of society.

All students receive some vocational training, and approximately 30 percent are enrolled in comprehensive school-to-work programs, Principal Darlene E. McClendon said. Based on their abilities, students learn how to stock shelves in supermarkets, do janitorial work at movie theaters, handle clerical work at hospitals, take care of plants at garden centers, and clean laundry at hotels.

Academics are emphasized as much as possible for each student, she said, but the school program also focuses on such life skills as how to plan and prepare a meal, clean an apartment, maintain personal



Jimmy Fahrenholtz

hygiene, and dress appropriately for work.

CUBE also sponsored site visits to Jones College Preparatory High School and John Spry Community School.

## Katrina offers lessons in disaster planning

**W**hen Hurricane Katrina struck the Louisiana coastline last year, school officials in Fort Worth, Texas, discovered that their emergency preparedness plan hadn't anticipated a huge influx of evacuees from a disaster elsewhere.

Although school officials managed to accommodate the needs of evacuated children, the oversight was instructive: There are always new lessons to learn after a disaster—and better preparations to make.

That reality prompted CUBE to sponsor a series of roundtable discussions during the conference to allow Gulf Coast officials to share their experiences and lessons learned—and talk about changes they're making to prepare for future natural and manmade disasters.

Jimmy Fahrenholtz, a school board member in New Orleans, spoke of the widespread devastation to his city but suggested that some good could come out of the disaster. By rebuilding the school district essentially from scratch, he said, there is an opportunity to avoid the fraud, corruption, and mismanagement that plagued the school system for years.

"The light is on us," he said. "The things that occurred before will never be allowed to happen again."

Many of the students who fled New Orleans ended up in East Baton Rouge Parish, La., and board member Patricia Smith told urban leaders that a quickly learned lesson was that communications are very important after a disaster.

"Parents and the community want to know what's going on," she said. "Our superintendent was on TV daily. The board was in touch with the superintendent three or four times a day."

In another session, several school officials admitted their emergency crisis plans had not anticipated the administrative headaches surrounding the loss of evacuees' academic and immunization records.

In North Carolina, the state had to waive student immunization requirements to allow schools to enroll students with lost medical records, said Joe White, chair of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) school board.

The Mobile County, Ala., school district will make its bus fleet available in future disasters to evacuate people, said board member Hazel Fournier. The district also is equipping three schools to accommodate evacuees with serious medical conditions, and one school is being equipped with a new generator to keep lights burning during a power outage.

## Successful urban boards share best practices

What do exemplary urban school boards share in common? They work hard to develop a good working relationship among board members. They make a dedicated effort to improve themselves through training. And they keep a razor-sharp focus on what's really important: student achievement.

That was the message shared by officials from the Hillsborough County, Fla., school district at a conference seminar sponsored by CUBE. Hillsborough, winner of the 2005 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence, was joined by officials from the two districts that were finalists for the honor.

One key to Hillsborough County's success is that board members know where they want to go—and how they intend to get there, said Superintendent Mary Ellen Elia. The board, in collaboration with senior staff, "put together a vision, mission, and strategic plan ... and set very clear goals and specific percentages for

increased achievement."

Officials from San Antonio, Texas, echoed that message and talked about their targeted approach to raise standards and expectations in their curriculum. Meanwhile, Norfolk, Va., officials spoke about the value of school board members conducting a formal evaluation of their own performance as a means to seek excellence.

"I think that's one of the pluses for our board—that we hold ourselves accountable," said Norfolk board member Lillian P. Wright.

Keeping the focus on academics isn't easy, but San Antonio officials say the school board holds a monthly working session to hear reports and question staff—a practice that keeps administrative matters from dominating regular board meetings. "It makes for a more efficient board meeting," said board member Justin Rodriguez.

## Indianapolis honored for support of music ed

The Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners has been named the recipient of the second annual VH1 Save the Music Award for Distinguished Support of Music Education.

Although Indianapolis virtually eliminated all instrumental music in its elementary schools during a financial hard time in the 1990s, the school board established a partnership with the VH1 Save the Music Foundation to restore those programs, add new courses at the middle and high schools, and restore money to the marching band programs.

"This award exemplifies the outstanding work that the Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners has done in ensuring students receive a complete education," said Paul Cothran, executive director of the VH1 Save the Music Foundation.

## Three CUBE districts receive Magna honors

Three CUBE member districts—Chicago, Lincoln, Neb., and Virginia Beach, Va.—have been honored as part of the 2006 Magna Awards program.

Chicago and Lincoln both were selected as winners in the 20,000 and over enrollment category in the 12th annual



Jeffrey Wright, assistant principal at Chicago's Jones College Prep, makes a point during his presentation while Keith Nance of Virginia's Portsmouth City Public Schools looks on during the CUBE site visit in Chicago. CUBE participants had a choice of three Chicago schools to visit during a pre-conference session.

contest, sponsored by *American School Board Journal* and Sodexo School Services. Virginia Beach received an honorable mention award.

Chicago was cited for its "Power of Parents Initiative," which was launched in May 2003 by school board President Michael Scott. The program forms partnerships with parents to promote student achievement in the nation's third largest school system. Conferences and workshops are designed to help parents motivate their children to succeed in school.

Lincoln was honored for a Community Learning Centers program that was started by the school board in 2001 to help close the district's achievement gap. The initiative "brings community partners, neighborhoods, and families together, all focused on helping children succeed academically, socially, and physically," Superintendent Susan Gourley said.

Virginia Beach was cited for its SAPLINGS (Students and Parents Learning Intellectual Growth Strategies) program, which combines parental involvement and community resources to nurture academic potential in students from lower-income families. The program teaches parents, faculty, and staff to use community cultural resources to help students become successful and confident independent learners.

The Magna Awards recognize districts across the country for outstanding programs that advance student learning and encourage community involvement in schools. This year's winning entries were selected based on three enrollment categories: less than 5,000 students, 5,000 to 20,000, and 20,000 and above. For more information on the program, visit [www.asbj.com/magna](http://www.asbj.com/magna). ■

# Rise of Chinese, Indian economies challenges U.S.

*Can urban schools help offset overseas growth in scientists, engineers?*

The growing economies of China and India, along with their rising output of science and engineering graduates, are fueling debate about the need to steer more U.S. students into math and science courses—and the need for urban schools to bolster achievement in these academic subjects.

Not since the days of Sputnik have U.S. policymakers expressed such worry about a global “brain race.” In February, President Bush proposed an American Competitiveness Initiative to bolster math and science study in schools. Meanwhile, several states have launched their own initiatives, including Texas, where policymakers plan to spend \$71 million in public and private moneys to create a network of 35 special academies to prepare thousands of minority and economically disadvantaged high school students for careers in technical fields.

But, despite test scores that show many urban students are lagging in math and science skills, urban districts are ahead of the political bandwagon. Many have spent recent years raising standards, introducing algebra and physics in earlier grades, encouraging minorities to enroll in advanced classes, and adding more time for math and science instruction.

In Knoxville, Tenn., for example, Hamilton County school officials are completing the final year of a five-year, \$5 million grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to improve math and science instruction. Today, 86.2 percent of students are proficient in math, an increase of 8.5 percentage points since 2003.

Meanwhile, in Raleigh, N.C., the Wake County Public Schools also are taking advantage of a NSF grant to expand student enrollment in eighth-grade algebra and high school calculus.

Many urban school districts also boast a number of magnet and high-performance high schools that feature a curriculum heavily slanted toward math, science, and even engineering. At North High School in Omaha, Neb., students can study one of the latest high-tech specialties: biotechnology.



## GROWING COMPETITION

Few of China's schools and universities are as high-tech as the China National Academy of Art (above), but the push for technology is a centerpiece of China's hopes of strengthening its economic and strategic position in the world. Earlier this year, state and national policymakers were alarmed by reports that the U.S. was losing its technological edge, that only 70,000 engineers graduated from U.S. universities in 2004, compared to 600,000 in China and 350,000 in India. A closer look at international data later revealed a much better picture. Still, policymakers have responded with new initiatives to bolster math and science study.

Annual Number of Engineering Graduates			
	U.S.	India	China
<b>Bachelor's degrees</b>	137,437	112,000	351,537
<b>Associate degrees (or equivalent)</b>	84,898	103,000	292,569

Source: Duke University, Framing the Engineering Outsource Debate: Placing the United States on a Level Playing Field with China and India

In an increasingly high-tech global economy, the teaching of math and science will only grow in importance—and policymakers can be expected to keep the pressure on urban school leaders to strengthen their curricula and student performance.

But Michael Teitelbaum, vice president of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, suggests school boards view the dire predictions

about the U.S. economy with a grain of salt. The data he's studied doesn't back up fears that there's a looming shortage of workers trained in math, science, or engineering.

“It's a good thing to do [to strengthen math and science education], but the broad statement that we're facing a substantial shortage of scientists and engineers doesn't appear to be true.” ■

# School climate survey available to guide policy

*Climate in schools is good, but a closer look reveals areas needing improvement*

With the release of *Where We Learn: The CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate*, the Council of Urban Boards of Education has put the spotlight on a critical issue influencing student academic performance and whether schools are a safe and nurturing environment for children.

So concluded NSBA Executive Director Anne L. Bryant when announcing the survey's release during a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

"This is a crucial study since research shows that improved school climate contributes to greater student achievement, higher morale, and a better relationship with the community," she said. "It is an important starting point for discussion."

Although the survey's findings were reassuring—urban students feel generally positive about their schools—school board members who want to improve school conditions need to pay close attention to the more negative responses, said CUBE Steering Committee Chair Brian Perkins, who also is the survey's



CUBE Chair Brian Perkins speaks at a press conference announcing the release of urban school climate results. To his left is CUBE Steering Committee member Warren C. Hayman of the Baltimore County, Md., Public Schools.

principal investigator.

That's because, no matter how many students respond positively about an issue, there are students in need of help, he said. For example, it's a positive sign if 85 percent of students state they feel safe at school. But if a school district serves 100,000 students, there are still 15 percent—15,000 children—who do not feel safe.

"That's a problem," Perkins said.

"These are not numbers that are small enough to ignore. We need to do what we can to create and preserve an environment that's more orderly and safe."

Officials in each of the 15 urban districts that participated in the survey have received additional data regarding their own students' responses, so they can study and identify potential problem areas in their own districts, he said.

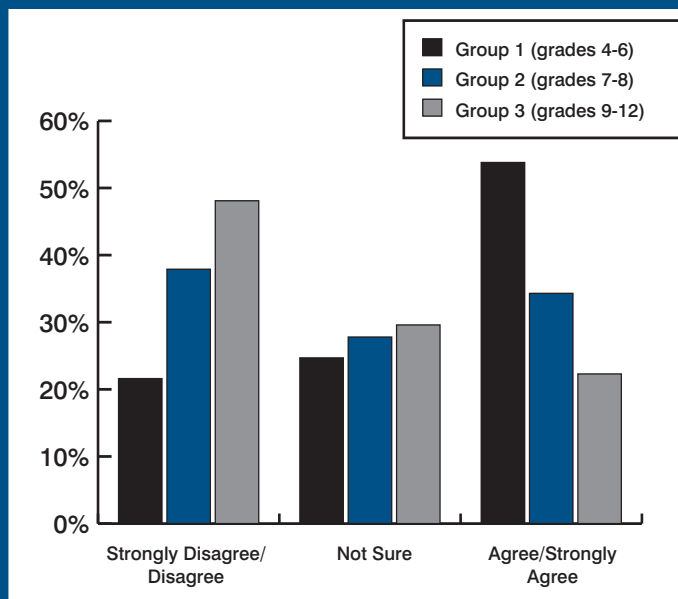
"They're already looking at the data," noted Perkins, who has met with officials in several districts to discuss the findings and expects future programming at CUBE conferences to continue discussions about school climate.

"We owe it to the students, and we commend those districts that were courageous enough to participate in this study and face the issue," he said.

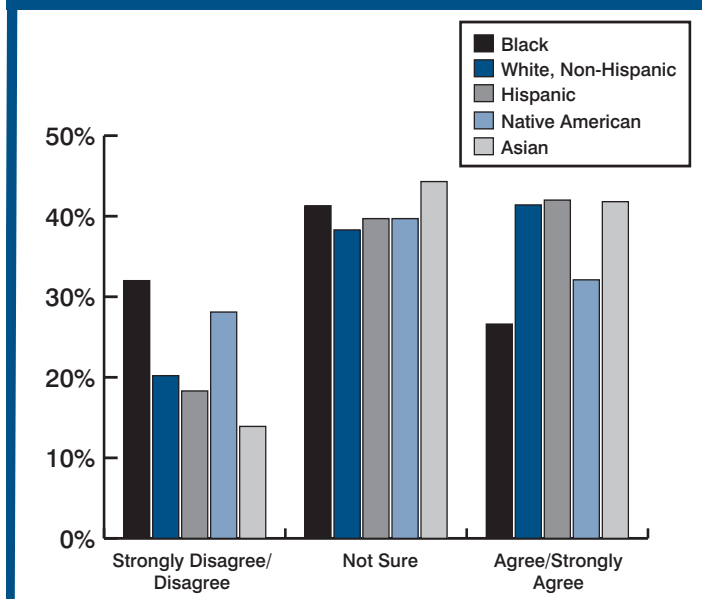
In Baltimore County, Md., Superintendent Joe A. Hairston has followed up on the survey by meeting with student focus groups at 13 high schools to talk about their personal experiences at school. "We have to go a bit deeper," he said, "and find out what life is really like for students."

One aspect of student life that Hairston said he reluctantly had to accept was that bullying remains a problem. In the national survey, more than three quarters of students surveyed said they were not bullied during the school day, but half said they'd seen others bullied. Hairston didn't share specifics on the findings in his

## Responses to "Teachers are able to stop someone from being a bully." (age)



## Responses to "Students at my school trust the teachers." (% within ethnicity)



district, but he said he's gotten the message.

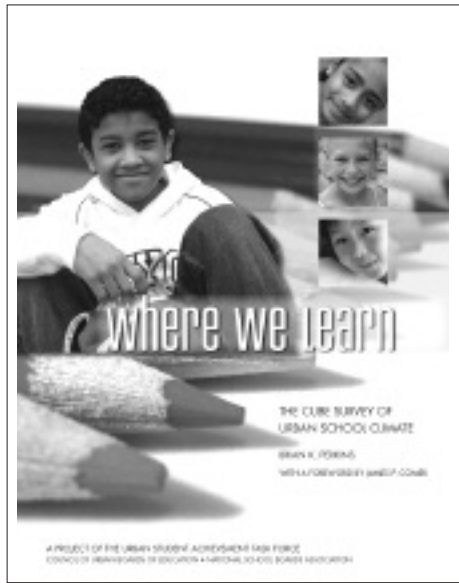
"Bullying is a reality," he said. "We're beginning to focus more attention on identifying the problems. What we're finding is bullies are isolated in geographical areas ... so it becomes a management problem with regards to how we strategically deploy our resources to respond."

In New Haven, Conn., the school district is planning a community forum to bring together parents and citizens to discuss the survey results and consider strategies to tackle problem areas, Perkins said. "We're going to do what we can to create and preserve an environment that's more orderly."

Such introspection should not be limited only to those school districts that participated in the survey, he said. Any urban school district can use the national findings as a benchmark for comparison to local surveys on school climate.

The largest research project ever conducted by CUBE, *Where We Learn* surveyed nearly 32,000 students from 15 urban school districts in 13 states. Students indicated their perceptions in five areas: school safety; bullying; trust, respect, and ethos of caring; racial self-concept; and general climate.

Student responses—particularly when broken down by age, sex, and racial/ethnic groups—identify where some segments of the student population are not experiencing school as officials might like, Perkins



said. For example:

- Although a majority of students (62.7 percent) feel safe at school, the rest are uncertain about their safety or do not feel safe.
- Older students are less likely to feel safe at school.
- Approximately one-fifth of students say that students are bringing weapons to school.
- Just over half (50.5 percent) of students say they witness children being bullied at least once a month.
- Older students are less likely to believe that teachers can stop bullying.

- Almost one-quarter of students (23.3 percent) do not think students trust their teachers. African-American students are much more likely to express distrust in their teachers.

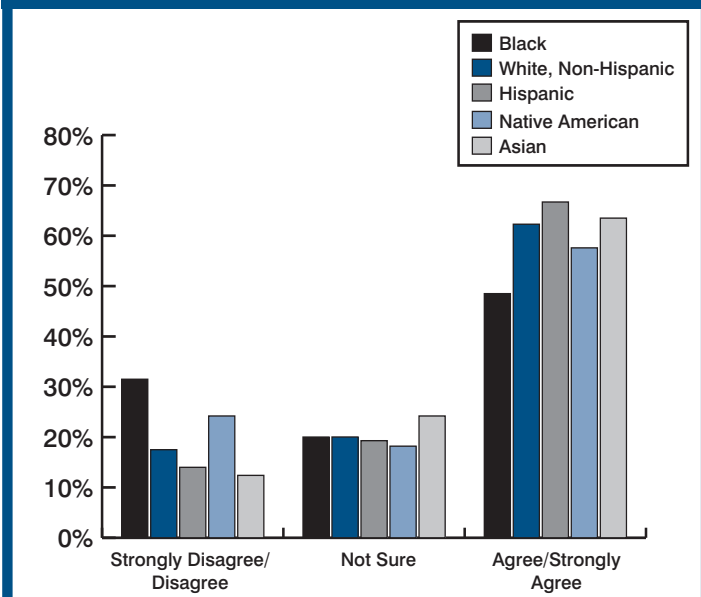
- One-fifth (20.8 percent) of students do not believe teachers respect students. Among African-American students, 31.5 percent feel that way, compared to only 17.5 percent of white students.

It's worth noting that the survey results measure perceptions—not necessarily reality—and they should not be read as what actually occurs in schools. But, Perkins said, perceptions matter, having "a distinct impact on how well students learn."

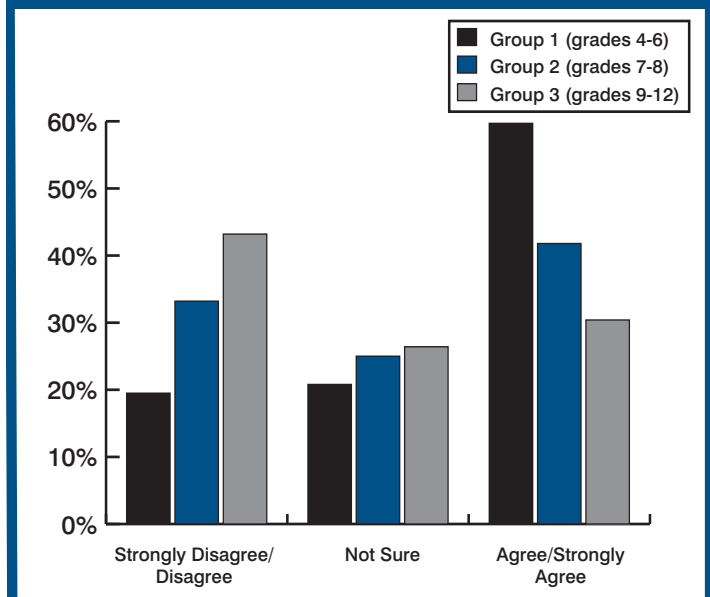
The goal of the survey is to help school boards understand the function of school climate and its influence, so that the survey results can help guide decision making and improvement initiatives, Perkins said.

The survey also is an opportunity to engage the community, he said. "The concerns we uncovered are not just school-based issues. They reflect issues we are all struggling with. Every member of the community is a role model for children. The responsibility for improving school climate rests on all our shoulders." CUBE will focus on the issues raised by the survey results throughout the coming year. Perkins also is working with the organization on a second climate survey of teachers of administrators. ■

### Responses to "At my school, teachers respect the students." (% within ethnicity)



### Responses to "At my school, teachers are fair to everyone." (age)



## POVERTY

Continued from page 1

For Nancy K. Cauthen, deputy director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, it's also time for school leaders to look beyond school walls and get serious about reaching out to the public and policymakers—and pound home the message that poverty can overwhelm even the best school reforms.

“People look to schools to solve everything, but they can't single-handedly overcome all the serious obstacles that poverty can pose for children,” she says. “The rest of society has got to do its part.”

### Mixed success

Such advocacy will prove easier if urban schools convince the nation that they can successfully educate children living in poverty. But data from the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Center highlights the extent of the challenge that lies ahead:

- A huge body of students—particularly in high-poverty areas—are stuck at the lowest performance levels. In one study of 11 big-city districts, slightly more than half of fourth-graders failed to score at a basic level in reading in 2005. And only one district—New York City—had made any significant progress in the last three years to bring these children up to grade level.

- Many students never walk out of high school with a diploma. On average, only 57.5 percent of urban ninth-graders nationwide graduate four years later. In some urban areas, the graduation rate is less than 40 percent. That compares to a 72.7 percent graduation rate in more affluent suburbs.

To be sure, such dismal statistics are offset by positive news. The same NAEP data shows that reading and math scores are increasing in many urban schools and there's been some progress in narrowing the achievement gap. Earlier this year, the Council of Great City Schools put the spotlight on these findings in its report, *Beating the Odds*.

“The nation's great city schools are getting better,” Michael Casserly, the council's executive director, said at the report's release. “This report should be put to bed the notion that urban schools are incapable of improving. We are improving, and we're improving rapidly.”

So is the glass half full—or half empty? A lot depends on how urban edu-



Students leave John Smith High School in Cincinnati. Beset by teacher layoffs, budget cuts, and a sizable number of low-income students, the school system faces immense challenges in raising student performance.

cation is judged in the future, says Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow of the Century Foundation, a New York City-based public policy group. Urban schools almost certainly will fall short if held to the unrealistic goals of the No Child Left Behind Act. But, he adds, if the public and policymakers come to accept that reality, urban schools have a chance to meet more realistic expectations. “It certainly is possible to reduce the achievement gap.”

Whether even that more modest goal can be achieved, however, depends on whether school boards can figure out how to replicate the success of some of their better urban schools, he says. And that's a dilemma. Although research has identified many of the characteristics and strategies needed to create a successful urban school, no one has found a reliable way to institutionalize on a districtwide basis the magical mix of talented leadership, high-achieving faculty, and effective instructional strategies that guarantees student academic success.

David Armor, professor of public policy at George Mason University, agrees. “There just isn't a proven set of techniques sitting there for school districts. You can find high-poverty schools that are

working. But there are no successful high-poverty school districts.”

### The good fight

Some school systems are working to prove that assessment wrong. The Boston Public Schools, for example, are a decade into a school reform effort that has won national acclaim and nearly doubled the number of children scoring at basic and proficient levels on state achievement tests.

The district's Focus on Children initiative relies on the same strategies that are being used elsewhere—higher standards, a heavy focus on literacy and math, class size reduction, staff development, and a host of intervention programs, among others. What is different, observers note, is that stable leadership on the school board and in the superintendency has allowed reforms the time and consistency of direction to make themselves felt.

It also doesn't hurt that the impact of poverty—which touches the lives of three-quarters of the city's schoolchildren—is never far from the minds of school officials, says district spokesperson Chris Horan. “Not a day goes by when the implications and fallout of poverty doesn't rear its head in school, so many of our

programs specifically target the impact of poverty.”

That’s been true in every urban school system in America, but school officials say they’re all the more cognizant of the importance of determining which strategies make the biggest difference in student learning. “We have to have an honest discussion about what works and what doesn’t,” says Frank Till, superintendent in Broward County, Fla.

In many cities, that discussion already has prompted a new focus on schools serving high concentrations of poverty. In Wake County, N.C., school officials pour additional funds into the district’s Challenged Schools program, which provides additional instructional staff for schools serving high concentrations of students in poverty. According to school board Chair Patti Head, this additional support—along with districtwide initiatives such as tutoring programs for the homeless and after-school homework assistance at community sites—is making a difference.

A similar initiative is underway in Buffalo, N.Y., where the highest-poverty schools are the focus of numerous initiatives, including additional resources, more health and social services, and, possibly, a longer school day and school year, says school board chair and CUBE Steering Committee member Florence Johnson. A greater focus also is being put on intervention in the pre-K through grade 3 years.

Early intervention, particularly in the preschool years, is a strategy that’s gaining a lot of attention in a number of urban school districts. William Bainbridge, president and CEO of SchoolMatch, a national school research and rating service, says he thinks preschool remediation and intervention programs offer urban school districts their best opportunity to overcome poverty-related issues.

“There’s only so much remediation a school can do,” he says. “But the earlier a school gets in touch with these children, the better chance they have.”

Other school systems have taken note of research that indicates that low-income students perform better in schools with lower concentrations of poverty. The Wake County schools now are attempting to limit schools to no more than 40 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Meanwhile, policymakers in Denver and Omaha, Neb., are eyeing Wake County’s efforts.

“We don’t think it’s necessarily the silver bullet,” Head says. “We just understand that when lots of children come to school with lots of needs, that can take a lot of time and attention and extra care from teachers and staff.”

## Reaching out

With urban school leaders doing all in their power on the education front, what more can be done? Julianne Malveaux has

“

**We have to communicate to the public that it’s a new day, and we’re doing things differently, and we’re very proud of that. But we need their support. We need to work together. It’s got to be everyone who impacts on children’s lives.**

**—Florence Johnson  
Buffalo Public Schools**

”

a simple answer: Advocate for your schools. Advocate for a new war on poverty. Advocate, advocate, advocate.

“Why aren’t people up in arms?” she asks. “Urban schools can’t do their job in a vacuum. If you don’t have the passion [to speak up], no one will. It’s on you.”

In Denver, school board Chair Theresa Peña sees a strong alliance with municipal and local business leaders as a necessary prerequisite to turning around a school system that’s dealing with increasing numbers of poor children and having a hard time raising test scores and trimming a high dropout rate.

What will make such a partnership work, as opposed to the more distant or strained relationships of the past, is growing recognition among all community leaders that the future of the city will be determined by the quality of the schools, she says.

The first steps to leverage community resources in a new way already have been taken, Peña says. The district and city are talking about ways to leverage community health services for low-income students, a move that should translate into less student absenteeism. Meanwhile, the Denver Housing Authority has agreed to help fight the district’s student mobility rate by helping families in public housing to avoid moves during the school year.

These are only preliminary steps, Peña says. “But I think we can do it. I think we

have the political will, and we really have no choice. I think, in the next five years, you’re going to see a big difference in student test scores.”

And, although it’s been said many times before, school boards need to give the public and lawmakers a better sense of the challenges they face—and also the progress being made, says Buffalo’s Florence Johnson. Lobbying is as much a part of fighting the impact of poverty as voting to

approve new instructional programs.

“We have to communicate that it’s a new day, and we’re doing things differently, and we’re very proud of that,” she says. “But we need their support. We need to work together. It’s got to be everyone who impacts on children’s lives.”

Demographic trends may offer urban policymakers a valuable window of opportunity, says Myron Orfield, executive director of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on Poverty and Education. The biggest growth in poverty is being seen in the inner-ring suburbs surrounding big cities, and that’s creating a new pool of political allies to help lobby for state and federal attention to issues of poverty.

What school boards can’t do is sit back and lament that policymakers aren’t interested in tackling poverty, he says. That head-in-the-sand approach leaves urban schools yet again alone in their fight to educate low-income children and only increases the risk that the current round of school reform will fall as short as those of the past.

“School boards have got to get proactive,” Orfield says. “It’s hard, but it’s not the time to quit. When you have a solution on the table that may work, you can convince people to support it. The choice is yours.”

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## L.A. mayor keeps up pressure in takeover bid

**M**ayor Antonio Villaraigosa was aggressively pursuing his bid to take control of the Los Angeles Unified School District as the *Urban Advocate* went to press.

In his annual State of the City Address, Villaraigosa called on the California legislature to authorize the district's takeover. Under his plan, a council of mayors from cities within the district would help oversee the schools, although the mayor of Los Angeles would retain significant authority over central office hiring and budget approval.

The mayor's plan would not seek the dismissal of the elected school board as was expected, however, but it would dramatically reduce its authority.

Taking control of the sprawling Los Angeles school district—the nation's second largest with 727,000 students—has been a high priority for Villaraigosa since his election. In recent months, he has conducted an aggressive public campaign on behalf of his takeover plan, and he has



Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, right, talks to students after delivering his State of the City address at The Accelerated School in Los Angeles. Stepping up his campaign to take control of the city school system, Villaraigosa called on state lawmakers to largely strip power from the elected school board and shift much of it to his office.

repeatedly denigrated the school system as failing.

That criticism has prompted complaints from school officials who say he has dismissed the good work that's been done in recent years.

"Our test scores are moving up," says school board Chair Marlene Canter. "Thirty-two schools just became California Distinguished Schools. We're in the midst of the biggest school construction program in the U.S., so we're relieving overcrowd-

## ORGANIZATIONS RALLY BEHIND LAUSD SCHOOL BOARD

CUBE, NSBA, and the California School Boards Association (CSBA) recently rallied behind the Los Angeles Unified School District's school board as it confronts an aggressive takeover bid by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

In response to Villaraigosa's announcement that he would ask the California legislature to grant him authority over the Los Angeles schools, the CUBE Steering Committee re-leased a statement expressing its "unequivocal" opposition to the takeover bid.

"The removal of the democratically elected school board . . . obliterates the rights of the community to determine the governance team of the school district," the statement reads. "The LAUSD governance team should continue to be fully empowered to address the educational needs of its students and manage the local district business affairs"

In its statement, CUBE argues that the mayor's takeover attempt under-

mines the school district's efforts to educate children and diminishes the political representation of voters outside the city limits who are served by the sprawling, 700-square-mile district.

"The effective role for the City of Los Angeles is to champion the mission and vision of LAUSD," CUBE contends. "The schools and children need civic and government leaders like the mayor to make neighborhoods a safe by place, make health care and other support services available to children and their families, and work with LAUSD to make best use of public lands."

At NSBA's 66th Annual Conference in Chicago, the NSBA Delegate Assembly—at the urging of CSBA—approved a beliefs and policies statement that opposes the efforts of any political jurisdiction "to remove, diminish, or interfere with the authority of local governing boards and districts."

The NSBA statement contends that

mayoral control of urban school districts is a flawed approach to school reform and "has not been found to be a panacea for improving outcomes for students."

Instead, NSBA contends, the role of local civic and policymakers is to support schools by ensuring safe streets for children, expanding access to health care, and working with school officials to develop other partnerships that facilitate student learning.

Meanwhile, CSBA is supporting the Los Angeles school board with public statements and the publication of "talking points" that opponents of the Villaraigosa's takeover bid can use in the ongoing public policy debate.

In its arguments, CSBA dismisses perceptions that mayoral takeovers are good public policy: "Mayoral control of urban school districts is a flawed approach to school reform that has not been found to be a panacea for improving outcomes for students."

ing that's been overlooked for decades. I can go on and on. This is a district on the move."

With the state's teacher unions opposed to the proposal, and some lawmakers expressing concerns, it was unclear whether Villaraigosa's proposal will win legislative approval. But the mayor did win the endorsement of one important ally: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

## NYC offers housing help to attract teachers

The New York City school system intends to offer up to \$15,000 in housing support to attract math, science, and special education teachers to work in some of the city's toughest middle and high schools.

The program, developed in collaboration with the Unified Federation of Teachers, will make it easier for the school system to recruit teachers in these hard-to-fill areas, school officials say.

Housing support will be available for incoming teachers who have at least two years of experience, pass a rigorous selection process, and commit to teach in the city for at least three years. Certified teachers who formerly taught in the city are also eligible as long as they have been out of the system for at least two years.

The incentive will include an initial payment of up to \$5,000 for housing-related expenses such as relocation expenses or a down-payment on a mortgage or rental fees, as well as a monthly housing stipend of \$400 for two years.

"These incentives give New York City a powerful advantage in attracting top talent in critical subject areas to our highest need schools," says Chancellor Joel I. Klein, who called the proposal "a creative way to recruit experienced, certified teachers" and help them "meet the costs of housing."

School officials say they will use the housing incentive as a marketing tool in recruiting trips across the nation and in an advertising campaign in local and national newspapers and other media.

In addition, the school system and teachers union will be partnering with the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development to develop a program to provide home ownership assistance to existing employees. Assistance will include



Students protesting over immigration reform proposals gather at Chicano Park in San Diego as part of a nationwide series of rallies in May. A number of high schools reported students walking out to participate in community marches. In Los Angeles, 24,000 marched, many of them converging on City Hall. Some districts treated the walkouts as unexcused absences or strongly discouraged student participation; others relied on adult volunteers, police, and off-duty teachers to watch over students. For students, the rallies served as a political statement and as an unsanctioned "teachable moment."

home ownership counseling and access to down-payment assistance for eligible employees and their families.

## State breaks up Omaha schools on racial lines

In a decision expected to invite a legal and political challenge, the Nebraska state legislature has approved a bill that would divide the Omaha Public Schools into three school districts organized along racial lines.

"We strongly oppose the Nebraska law," said Bruce S. Gordon, president and CEO of the NAACP, one of several organizations threatening litigation. "The Supreme Court ruled 52 years ago that separate but equal schools result in inequality and poor education for minority children."

The law has its roots in a controversial effort by the Omaha school board to annex affluent suburbs within the city limits, calling for "One City, One School District" to improve school integration and improve the school system's weakening tax base.

In the midst of debate surrounding that proposal, the state legislature considered an alternative plan that would provide Omaha-area districts with a common tax levy but protect existing school district

borders. Then the measure to divide the city along largely racial lines was introduced, with the support of the state's sole black senator.

Public reaction to the new law has been varied. Many have criticized the law as a return to sanctioned segregation, but one editorial in *The Omaha Star*—a black-owned newspaper—backed the plan. Meanwhile, the NACCP, among others, has threatened litigation, and some community leaders are talking about bringing the issue back to the legislature before the 2008 deadline for the district's breakup.

## CUBE districts are finalists for Broad education prize

Four CUBE-member districts—Boston; Bridgeport, Conn.; Jersey City, N.J.; and Miami-Dade County—and the New York City school system have been named finalists for the 2006 Broad Prize for Urban Education.

One of the most prestigious national awards in public education, the Broad Prize awards \$500,000 in college and post-secondary scholarships to students in the winning school district. The four remaining finalists each receive \$125,000 in scholarship funds.

Since the Broad Prize was established

in 2002, two CUBE districts—the Houston Independent School District and the Norfolk Public Schools—have won. This is the second year that New York City has been a finalist for the prize and the fifth year that the Boston schools have been a contender.

“The strength of our nation depends on the strength of our schools, especially those in large urban districts that serve so many of our children,” said Eli Broad, founder of the Broad Foundation. “Broad Prize finalist districts are doing what some say is impossible—improving students’ performance, regardless of their race or family income—while at the same time closing persistent achievement gaps.”

The winner will be announced Sept. 19.

## Rochester, N.Y., boasts Superintendent of Year

Manuel Rivera, superintendent of New York’s Rochester City Schools, has been named 2006 National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of

School Administrators (AASA).

Co-sponsored with ARAMARK Education, the annual award recognizes outstanding public leaders. Rivera won out over 50 state finalists, all of whom represent excellence in school leadership.

Rivera has been superintendent of the 46,700-student Rochester, N.Y., district since 2002. Previously, he was executive vice president of development for Edison Schools Inc. His desire to work more closely with schools, students, and their families drew him back to Rochester, where he had served as superintendent from 1991 to 1994.

## Baltimore targets schools after takeover is averted

Soon after the Maryland General Assembly blocked the state’s takeover of 11 failing Baltimore schools, city school officials announced plans to target \$22 million in new funds to low-performing schools and have the worst schools report directly to Schools CEO Bonnie S.

Copeland’s senior staff.

Officials say they intend to close two low-performing high schools, break up three others, and encourage the best principals to work in seven troubled middle schools.

“The only thing that counts will be how well and how quickly we achieve our academic goals and restore public confidence in our ability to enable our students to achieve academically,” school board Chair Brian D. Morris told the *Baltimore Sun*.

The school system also is working to comply with a variety of state-ordered reforms that include adopting a new curriculum based on one in a successful neighboring county, evaluating targeted senior staff, and hiring “turnaround” specialists to work with principals at the district’s lowest-performing schools.

The district’s progress will be closely watched by state officials. In March, the state board of education voted to take over 11 city schools—only to have the Maryland General Assembly adopt legislation that overruled the decision. That move sparked a veto attempt by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. that was overridden by lawmakers after a highly partisan debate. ■



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