

CUBE boards tackle tough issues at conference

Sessions center around race, poverty, isolation

Asked to describe their experiences with racial segregation at school, a group of high school students from Nevada's Clark County Public Schools said their peers regularly self-segregate themselves in classrooms and the cafeteria. And most said they felt comfortable with this behavior.

"I believe it has a positive effect," one student said. "You tend to feel more like one another. We feel more comfortable. "We feel like we relate better to each other."

That observation—shared during a panel discussion at the 37th Annual CUBE Conference—underscored the tough challenge urban school boards face in trying to promote student achievement and prepare young people to live in an increasingly diverse America. Those themes resonated throughout the conference, held Sept. 29 to Oct. 2 in Las Vegas, as CUBE members heard a preview of the upcoming school climate report and honored the School District of Hillsborough County as the winner of the second CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.

Urban school boards must have the



NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant (left) and Daniel Domenech, senior vice president of National Urban Markets for McGraw-Hill Education (right), pose with winners of the second CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence. Pictured are Julian Trevino of the San Antonio Independent School District, Susan L. Valdes of the School District of Hillsborough County, Fla., and Lillian Wright of the Norfolk Public Schools. See story on page 6.

courage to tackle the difficult issues of race, poverty, and student isolation, said Jill Wynns, a CUBE Steering Committee member from San Francisco who made introductory remarks during the discussion.

"Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" asked Wynns, who is co-chair of CUBE's Racial Isolation Task Force. "School leaders have a special

responsibility to ensure that the message students receive at school helps them understand racism in our country."

Issues related to race and racial attitudes can be emotionally charged—and thus a challenge for school board members to confront. But the topic was appropriate

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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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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Deaths of Civil Rights pioneers remind us that our work is not finished

By **Brian Perkins**



Rosa Parks is escorted by E.D. Nixon, former president of the Alabama NAACP, on arrival at the courthouse in Montgomery, Ala. on March 19, 1956, for the trial in the racial bus boycott. Parks was fined \$14 on Dec. 5 for failing to give up her seat for a white passenger on a city bus. The bus boycott started on the day she was fined. There were 91 other defendants.

quiet, shy demeanor, this seamstress created a spark that set off an explosive movement toward equality for this country's disregarded citizens. After a long day at work she simply wanted to sit on the bus for the fare that had been paid for her transportation. She was tired—not from her work as a seamstress, but tired of the humiliation and the laws that designated her as a second-class citizen.

I am reminded of a saying shared by my grandmother, "When people have had enough, they will have had enough." Ms. Parks had had enough.

Her act of defiance led blacks to boycott the buses for almost 13 months. She continued a life of service with the NAACP and various civil rights groups fighting for the rights of all citizens guaranteed under the constitution.

Many young people view these events and women as symbols of a time long past. Their ability to stand for what is right in spite of personal danger, however, is a story that should be shared for all generations. Schools should use these exemplars of lives dedicated to human service to illustrate the impact of individual sacrifice on the world stage. The lives of Constance Baker Motley and Rosa Parks individually changed their times. Collectively, they changed the world.

But, their work is not finished. As board members, we must remain steadfast to the cause of equity, the ideal of fairness, and the promise of democracy. We are challenged to do so, obligated to try, and destined to accomplish it.

Brian K. Perkins is chair of the CUBE Steering Committee and president of the New Haven Public Schools board of education.

In the last two months, we've witnessed the deaths of two extraordinary women. In September, we lost Constance Baker Motley, the nation's first African-American woman federal judge. In October, we lost Rosa Parks, heroine of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Both lives are shining examples of human potential, courage, and determination. Their stories have tremendous relevance for children in today's schools.

Judge Motley, the daughter of a chef who worked for an exclusive club at Yale College, so impressed a wealthy white philanthropist that he paid for her education at New York University. She went on to receive her law degree from Columbia University and subsequently joined the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. She played a prominent role in higher education desegregation cases all over the South.

As a judge, Motley worked tirelessly to guarantee rights for African-American plaintiffs involved in disputes related to access to higher education as well as equal access to railroad and bus terminals in Jackson, Miss. She argued cases before the Supreme Court and helped desegregate recreational facilities. Until her death, she continued to serve with senior status as a member of the federal judiciary.

Rosa Parks, the daughter of Alabama field hands, became known as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement. With a

Climate study looks at the role of race in school experiences

On the whole, student responses to CUBE's national school climate survey are positive on a variety of issues, suggesting that urban schools are doing a better job than critics of public education are willing to admit.

Brian K. Perkins, chair of the CUBE Steering Committee and the survey's author, gave conference attendees a brief update on the findings, which will be released in early December. Almost 33,000 students from 15 CUBE member districts were surveyed this spring and asked their views on race, safety, and school culture.

According to Perkins, some students

are least likely to indicate plans for a postsecondary education;

- African-American students are least likely to believe teachers respect or like students;
- Hispanic and Native American students are least likely to indicate that teachers "make them feel good about themselves;" and
- African-American students are least likely to believe teachers care whether they succeed or not.

Digging into these findings—and determining the reasons behind the responses—will be important to help students, Perkins said. But such research also will be



Brian Perkins, chair of the CUBE Steering Committee and author of a survey on school climate, gives a preview of the findings during a session at the CUBE Annual Meeting.



Fort Bend Superintendent Betty Baitland listens as board member Cynthia Knox makes a point during the session.

don't rate their schools well on many issues. For example, the survey reveals that Hispanic students were the most likely to indicate that they felt unsafe at school. "Why?" Perkins asked. "What's happening? Why are Hispanic students experiencing school differently?"

On other issues, a student's race also appears to play a major role in his or her experiences at school. Among the findings Perkins shared:

- Hispanic and Native American stu-

needed to respond to inquiries about this racial divide that will come from parents and policymakers who learn of the study.

"People are going to pick up on this and ask why," he said. "You need to be prepared for that."

While school boards examine the survey results for their districts, CUBE also will be looking for ways to help urban leaders put the data to good use, Perkins says. Ideas in the works include a follow-up study of teacher attitudes, training ses-

sions at future conferences, and help for school boards on how to explain the survey results to their public and the media.

After Perkins' remarks, officials from the Fort Bend Independent School District in Sugar Land, Texas, talked about their efforts to address the needs of students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds—and how they intended to share survey data with the public.

School board member Cynthia Knox told urban leaders that her board started a discussion of race and culture several years ago, and it has been good for the school board and the community.

"It helps us look at the whole child," she said. "It helps us as board members to show sensitivity. Yes, we have a big focus on [academic] accountability, but we also need a big focus on children who don't want to be in school or see too much fighting."

Feedback from students made clear that "things were happening in our school related to race," she said, and the result was a diversity initiative that involved an advisory council, training of staff, and a No Place for Hate campaign developed by the Anti-Defamation League.

Participating in the CUBE survey is a logical extension of the district's efforts, and based on survey results, she said, "my hope is we will use the same kind of proactive, positive approach in response. We need to show the value of this for students, what [the survey] has found for us, and what we will do about it." ■

Katrina tales cite challenges and caring



Denise Brodsky, former CUBE Steering Committee member, accepts a plaque at the CUBE Annual Banquet. Brodsky resigned her position as a member of the Clark County School Board earlier this year to become the executive director of the United Way of St. Charles Parish outside New Orleans.

The first bus of New Orleans evacuees that arrived at the Houston Astrodome was a bit of a surprise: The Orleans Parish school bus was filled with teenagers—and the driver was a 15-year-old who'd commandeered the bus to escape the flood-ravaged city.

This astonishing tale was shared with urban school leaders during an informal briefing on the impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita on CUBE districts along the Gulf Coast.

No school district felt the brunt of the storms more than Orleans Parish, which serves New Orleans and surrounding suburbs. School board member Jimmy Fahrenholtz told urban leaders that the district's 65,000 students were gone—scattered as evacuees across the nation. He also shared the grim news that at least 80 flooded schools were a total loss and would need to be bulldozed to the ground.

The one silver lining of the disaster, Fahrenholtz said, is that many of the district's schools should have been condemned years ago. Now, with emergency relief funds promised, the district has the

opportunity to start anew with clean, safe, modern school buildings.

"There's going to be some distress and trauma, but we're going to come back," he said. "We're in New Orleans. We've faced bubonic plague, influenza, yellow fever, all kinds of hurricanes, and more floods than you can read about in the Bible. Now our job is to provide a free and appropriate education to whoever walks through our doors."

Noel Hammatt, vice president of the East Baton Rouge Parish (La.) school board, said he was heartened by the welcome his district gave to 8,000 evacuated students from New Orleans. All are now in school.

"We wanted them to know there was a place for them," he says, adding that the superintendent shared with the board her thinking after evacuees began arriving: "We don't have the money to do the things that need to be done," she said, "but I'm going to do it anyway."

In Mobile, Ala., where hurricanes are no stranger, the school board has taken some satisfaction from a farsighted policy: It signed contracts with builders to make school repairs a top priority in the wake of a natural disaster. Soon after Katrina's winds died down, workers were putting schools back in order—without the need for bids or to compete with homeowners for contractors.

As a result, the county quickly reopened all but one of its 105 schools, even though 28 will need significant repair in the future, said school board member David L. Thomas Jr.

"We did the job that needed to be done, Hammatt said. In my mind, there's no better justification for local control and school boards than what we saw in the last few weeks."

Student panel shares views on segregation, isolation

To hear students speak with complacency about voluntarily segregating themselves by race in the cafeteria and on campus was a stark reminder that boards have a tough task ahead to promote diversity in schools.

Yet, urban school leaders expressed an eagerness to confront this reality—and garner other insights from a panel of Clark County, Nev., high school students who spoke at a meeting of CUBE's Racial Isolation Task Force.

"We should listen to students on this subject," Jill Wynns, a CUBE Steering Committee member from San Francisco, told board members before the panel discussion began. "We sometimes forget to ask children about what they feel and what affects them."

Although students were not always eloquent in sharing their perspectives, the insights they provided were telling. For example, many students acknowledged the social division of students by race—but argued that the practice had more to do with wanting to be with students who shared similar interests than with racial biases.

In schools with less diversity—or in magnet schools divided into distinct academic programs—students said social groups tended to be organized by interests. Thus students enrolled in an arts program would tend to "hang out" together rather than mix with students in an advanced science program. Race played a smaller role in social divisions.

But one student pointed to school academic practices as a culprit in the racial isolation of some students. There is a racial divide based on tracking, particularly between students in honors and Advanced Placement classes and poorer students in less ambitious academic courses.

It also should come as no surprise, the student noted, that immigrants still learning English would be very isolated—and "never hang out with an honor student. They can't relate to each other. There's segregation within every aspect of our school system."

Part of that segregation might be blamed on the language barrier, but the student noted that little effort is made to be inclusive of English learners. For example, they are not given an opportunity to enroll in college-track courses or learn about college admission or scholarships. It's just assumed that high school is end of their education.

"If you're an immigrant, you should have the same opportunity to learn about colleges and scholarships," he said. "But a lot of them don't, and school boards

should make that an option or make that a mandate.”

But race definitely plays a role, as students freely admitted that they preferred to socialize with those peers they feel “most comfortable with.” And those peers tended to be of the same race.

Although some students downplayed the issue of race, others revealed the tensions that exist within their schools. One, for example, noted frequent fights between African-American and Hispanic students outside the school building.

“I don’t know why it is,” she said. “But it’s like every Friday after school. The police know about it, but they never do anything about it.”

Students also shared their impressions about teacher attitudes. When a minor discipline issue arises, for example, an African-American student was more likely to get in trouble than an academically successful white student. A non-English-speaking parent was more likely to wait for an appointment with the principal than a parent who spoke English.

One student expressed the opinion that her principal “didn’t like black people.”

But some students were optimistic about the future. One said: “I think our generation is getting more involved in things. We talk about racism and learning. We know it’s wrong to do. We know what’s right and wrong, and we’ll treat one race like another.”



Clark County student Nelson Araujo makes a point during a student panel session at the conference.

Indoor air quality issues raise concerns for districts

Maintaining good air quality inside urban schools—and responding quickly to complaints of mold, odors, and water stains—

can help school boards avoid costly repairs, bad publicity, and student and staff absenteeism caused by respiratory illnesses.

That was the message urban school leaders heard in an early bird session on healthy learning environments held prior to the CUBE Annual Conference.

Air quality is not a health issue to be casually dismissed, said Ericka Plater Turner, who oversees an indoor air quality initiative for the American Association of School Administrators.

Indoor air pollution can be two to five times greater than outdoors pollution, and in some conditions, studies have found indoor pollution rates are 100 times greater than outdoors, she said. Such conditions exacerbate student and teacher asthma, allergies, and other respiratory conditions.

The impact of this pollution is not to be underestimated. Nationwide, Turner said, more than 14.7 million student absences annually can be attributed to respiratory complaints. That translates into a lot of lost instructional time when schools are desperately working to boost student achievement.

“When we talk about reduced productivity, it ties into air quality,” Turner said. “A 1996 study of Washington, D. C., schools showed that academic achievement would be 5 to 11 percent higher if the physical conditions of the schools improved.”

In North Carolina, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District takes the issue of indoor air quality seriously, according to Philip Berman, the district’s executive director of building services.

Having observed a handful of districts spend millions of dollars to remove mold from buildings—and endure the negative publicity that surrounds any closing of a school for health risks—Charlotte-Mecklenburg has implemented a preventive maintenance and health monitoring system that ensures schools are inspected monthly, he said.

Maintenance and custodial staff are trained in environmental safety practices, Berman said. And, because a leaking HVAC system or roof can allow moisture to create a colony of mold within days, school employees are expected to respond quickly to complaints about mold, odor, or signs of moisture inside a building.

Susan LaCombe, asthma project manager for the Los Angeles Unified School District, focused her remarks on the impact of indoor air quality on the grow-

ing population of students with asthma.

In Los Angeles, more than 63,000 students are diagnosed with the respiratory condition, and school officials have identified a variety of problems that aggravate the condition—including mold, classroom pets, chemicals in science labs, blocked vents that prevent air flow, cluttered classrooms that make it difficult to dust, and unapproved cleaning materials brought to school by teachers.

“What we try to get across to everybody is that indoor air quality is important,” she said. “This affects the way people learn. We want to end up with a healthy and more productive place for teachers and children to learn.”

Federal lobbying faces tough budget challenge

In summarizing legislative activity on Capitol Hill, NSBA Associate Executive Director Michael A. Resnick told urban school leaders that they were “going to hear some things you’re not going to like.”

The bottom line was that a growing federal deficit—coupled with the need to finance hurricane relief along the Gulf Coast—is expected to hurt lobbying efforts to raise federal education funding. The outlook for more funding for Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), he warned, was “bleak.”

But NSBA has been “working vigorously” to make clear to Congress the need to help school districts affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Resnick told board members. Money is needed to replace damaged buildings with modern, up-to-date structures “fit and ready for the 21st century, so students have an opportunity for academic achievement.”

Hurricane damage also will hurt local economies in the stricken region, and schools will need federal money to help offset the loss of local and state tax revenues, he said. And school districts that have enrolled large numbers of displaced children from New Orleans and elsewhere also will need help in covering the unanticipated costs associated with these children.

“This is not going to be a quick fix,” he said. “This is not a one-year deal. Over time, those [district] budgets are going to be dissipated by the unexpected expenses.”

Resnick urged urban leaders to speak to their members of Congress about the

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Exemplary district, exemplary board

Hillsborough County wins second CUBE Annual Award



Susan Valdes, a board member with the School District of Hillsborough County, Fla., speaks after accepting the second CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence on behalf of her district. CUBE Steering Committee members and NSBA Board President Joan Schmidt, and NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant joined Valdes on stage for the presentation, held during the CUBE Annual Banquet.



Julian Trevino, president of the San Antonio Independent School District board of trustees, makes a point during his speech at the CUBE Annual Banquet.

The Hillsborough County, Fla., school district has been named the winner of the 2005 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.

“This is a district that’s willing to think out of the box,” NSBA Executive Director Anne L. Bryant told urban school leaders who gathered at the CUBE Annual Banquet to honor Hillsborough County, which includes Tampa and the surrounding suburban and rural areas.

In accepting the award, Hillsborough County school board member Susan L. Valdes said the board’s success has a lot to do with building relationships. “It comes down to the connection between schools, teachers, and students. If we do our jobs properly as school board members, those connections are made—and miracles happen.”

Valdes shared one small miracle with conference attendees. At an elementary school, she says, an eight-year-old immigrant boy had missed half a year of second grade because of ill health. But the child’s teachers refused to let him “fall through the

cracks,” and they saw to it that he got medical attention and extra instructional help.

“That’s when this little boy blossomed,” she said. “He has moved back up to the third grade. His teachers love him. His parents are proud of him. He loves math, and he smiles a lot more. It’s the little miracles like this that happen in your schools every day. That’s how you raise student achievement.”

The Award for Urban School Board Excellence is presented annually to a school district that best demonstrates excellence in four core areas: board governance, closing the achievement gap, academic achievement, and community engagement.

The award, sponsored by McGraw-Hill Education, is designed to highlight the link between school achievement and successful school board governance. The winning district receives a \$5,000 contribution to its student scholarship fund.

With 192,000 students, Hillsborough County is the ninth-largest school district in the nation. Approximately 45 percent



Ben Canada of the Texas Association of School Boards discusses the judging process for the CUBE Annual Award. Canada was one of four judges who selected the winner. The other judges were Arnold Fege of the Public Education Network, JoAnn Yee of the California School Boards Association, and Michael Usdan of the Institute for Educational Leadership.



Norfolk school board member Lillian Wright and Superintendent Stephen Jones pose with (from left) NSBA Board President Joan Schmidt, NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant, and Daniel Domenech, senior vice president of National Urban Markets for McGraw-Hill Education.

of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

In honoring Hillsborough, the awards panel noted that the school board and superintendent relied heavily on community input in developing their vision for the district.

Also noted was the district's new initia-

tive to establish a differential program for teacher recruitment and retention. Veteran teachers who chose to work with high-poverty students earned a 10 percent boost in pay. Additional money also was available to teachers who met federal standards for being "highly qualified" or earned National Board Certification.

These incentives resulted in a number of "exemplary teachers" transferring to one of the county's most challenged schools this year.

Additionally, Hillsborough County has gone to unusual lengths to involve parents as partners in their children's learning. A parent resource bus staffed with certified teachers visits neighborhoods, community centers, clinics, and homeless shelters to give parents tips on helping their children succeed in school.

Daniel Domenech, senior vice president of National Urban Markets for McGraw-Hill Education, congratulated Hillsborough County for its exemplary school board vision and leadership. He said the district's governance team "stands among the nation's leading urban school districts in making student achievement for all a reality." ■

Other applicants for the 2005 CUBE award were: Camden (N.J.) Public Schools, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Cleveland City School District, Guilford County (N.C.) Schools, Jersey City Public Schools, Lansing (Mich.) Public Schools, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Pontiac (Mich.) Public School District, Richmond (Va.) City Schools, and the Rochester (N.Y.) City School District.

NORFOLK AND SAN ANTONIO CITED AS FINALISTS

Finalists for the 2005 Award for Urban School Board Excellence were Virginia's Norfolk Public Schools and the San Antonio (Texas) Independent School District.

Strengthening and expanding early childhood education programs, a hefty investment in data analysis systems, and a push to build partnerships with local business and the community are cited for helping Norfolk make academic gains and narrow the black-white achievement gap.

"Our board is looking to increase our AP classes, with a focus on increasing the number of African-American students enrolled in AP classes," school board member Lillian P. Wright told attendees at the awards banquet. "We also have established

benchmarks above and beyond our state mandate requiring for 100 percent proficiency. By 2010, we expect to be a world-class school district."

In San Antonio, good governance is cited as helping transform a school district that was in trouble only a few years ago. The school board's clear focus on policymaking, more accountability at all levels, new K-8 elementary schools, and expanded early childhood education and smaller learning communities have led to increased student achievement.

"It has to be a team effort," school board President Julian H. Trevino said at the banquet. "I'm fortunate to serve on a board that includes diverse personalities but a common desire to put children at the top of the agenda."



Tony Silvain, a board member in the Sunnyside Unified School District outside Tucson, smiles during Phillip Boyle's session on civility among government officials.

need for financial assistance for hurricane-affected school districts. He also invited them to talk about the need for the U.S. Department of Education to ease rules related to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

Although some rules were eased in states affected by the hurricanes, Resnick said, more regulatory relief is needed. With schools shut down for days, weeks, and even months, and with other schools taking in evacuated children whose education has been interrupted, test data for this year is largely worthless for purposes of comparison to past years.

He suggested additional waivers regarding annual yearly progress (AYP) requirements for schools affected by the hurricanes.

Civility I: Responsible discourse is critical

Horror stories abound of school boards that tear themselves apart with name calling, back stabbing, and factional struggles over policymaking, consultant Phillip Boyle told urban leaders during a workshop on civil public discourse.

But, he argued, the stories are less about

bad boards than about board members who don't know how to practice responsible discourse. It is, in fact, a challenge for many people to communicate and collaborate—on an equal basis—with those who have different values and perspectives.

Boyle, president of the North Carolina-based Learning and Governing Associates, said this difficulty is understandable if people examine typical life experiences. Most people spend their lives in hierarchical settings, such as school, office, or military, where orders are given or collaboration is overseen by superiors who enforce a code of conduct.

Few people, he said, deal with peers on an equal playing field, where all have equal power and a say in decisions.

"The discourse on our boards is a unique experience," he said. "There's nothing else like it in our lives. There is no other institution that works this way. That's one of the reasons it's so hard. We don't get to practice these skills."

All of this can lead board members to pull away from those with very different opinions and move closer to those with similar views, Boyle says. It becomes hard to understand the perspective of some colleagues. This can foster frustration, distrust, and hostility among members, undermining a board's ability to find common ground.

What school board members must do is embrace the "politics of differences," he said. Instead of looking at differences of opinion as an obstacle, board members must respect and welcome new perspectives—and see the value of them, even when disagreement continues.

Another dimension of responsible discourse is the board's ability to communicate and collaborate with community members with different opinions, Boyle said. "You can have a board that gets along fine, but if the community is coming down on you, it's not necessarily [successful]."

Civility II: Strategies improve discourse

Contentious board meetings do more than undermine the effectiveness of the school board. They also undermine support for public education, local control of schools, and, ultimately, the credibility of the American democratic process.

So argued Jo Ann Yee, director of urban education and outreach for the California School Boards Association and

copresenter of a second conference session on school board civility.

In working with school boards, Yee said, she's learned that conflict stems partly from the psychological shift that board members must make: When board members run for office, they are running as individuals. But once they win election, they must come to terms with the fact that they are part of a team.

For some school board members, she says, it's a difficult shift in perspective. "Often what they really want to do is represent a particular interest or constituency group or keep an eye on the board and superintendent so they don't get out of line."

Joining Yee was Noel Hammatt, vice president of the East Baton Rouge Parish school board, who suggested that board conflict is partly due to the "argumentative culture" that's taken hold in the nation. Instead of a respectful dialogue of ideas, the more common approach to debate today involves people talking past one another, questioning the integrity of opponents, and dismissing any value in opposing opinions.

Overcoming these obstacles to civil discourse isn't easy, but Yee and Hammatt offered strategies to help board members eager to mend fences.

For one, Hammatt said, keep in mind that body language communicates a great deal—and people notice. When someone is speaking, a look of boredom, tapping one's fingers, or whispering something to an administrator sends a message that you don't value what's being said or who is saying it.

Hammatt also suggested refocusing the board's perspective away from conflict when tension begins to build during a debate and reframing the debate in a more positive way. A good question to ask, he said: "Could we spend a moment to talk about how this ties into our agreed-upon board goals?"

Board members also should avoid public comments that put colleagues on the defensive for their views or question the motives of a fellow board member, he said. Instead, board members should acknowledge the strengths of an opposing argument and show respect for it.

Hammatt also reminded board members that civil discourse is easiest when people have a trusting relationship. And the time to build that relationship is now.

"You've got to make those personal contacts before divisive meetings ... before those hard, tough decisions have to be

made,” he said. “You need to find common interests. When we dig deep enough, we find shared interests.”

If nothing else, he reminded attendees, “everyone, at some level, got on the school board because they want to make things better.”

Pay-for-performance teacher plans can work

The traditional teacher salary schedule has outlived its usefulness, and the hostility of teacher unions toward performance-pay systems is changing, according to Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Association.

Speaking at a workshop on alternative teacher-pay plans, Urbanski cautioned, however, that experiments with new compensation models wouldn’t succeed by simply linking salaries to student academic performance. They also must address the issues of teacher quality.

Salaries must recognize teacher training and skills for a simple reason: Surveys show that teacher qualifications are the single largest factor—outside a student’s home life—to affect academic success in school.

“You can’t improve student achievement without improving teacher knowledge,” Urbanski said. “Anybody who believes the best way to improve teachers is with a [financial] carrot or stick must assume teachers can do a better job and are holding back.”

Urbanski also encouraged school boards to look at a variety of models for alternative salary schedules, including different pay scales for different levels of responsibility, such as mentor teachers. He also suggested linking pay to assignments in high-need or low-performing schools, credentials in shortage areas such as math and science, or receipt of National Board Certification.

Jeff Buck, a teacher and union liaison to the Denver Public Schools, spoke about his district’s Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp), a groundbreaking pay system that links teacher pay to the school district’s instructional mission.

Under the pay plan, a teacher’s salary will be linked to improving student achievement, he said. Achievement benchmarks are not based on test scores, however, but agreed-upon academic objectives for teachers and schools.

The new plan also requires strong



Pamela Jones of the Atlantic City, N.J., school board laughs as she is “interviewed” by Noel Hammatt, a school board member in the East Baton Rouge (La.) Parish, during a session on civil discourse.

financial support for professional development, including both university and in-district training, Buck said. “We believe that this is going to encourage reflective practice and will teachers to new skills.”

Several factors contributed to teachers’ willingness to accept a nontraditional salary schedule, he said. One is that teacher success will be based on reasonable benchmarks on academic progress rather than standardized test scores that do not take into account student and classroom circumstances. Developing the plan with union cooperation—and allowing teachers to stay with the old pay system if they wish—also lowered teacher resistance.

Implementation of ProComp is contingent on voter approval of a \$25 million tax levy to ensure a steady revenue source for the program, he said.

Finally, David L. Thomas Jr., a school board member in Mobile County, Ala., spoke of his district’s efforts to modify teacher compensation at five of the county’s lowest-performing schools.

Although all five schools had been “reconstituted one way or another”—with new staffs or principals or both—the school board was stymied by the fact that nothing seemed to spark improvement, he said.

Determined to tackle the problem, the board implemented a number of new reform projects, including market incentives. For example, teachers could earn \$4,000 and principals \$6,000 for achieving individual and schoolwide goals on achievement and student academic growth.

Signing bonuses also were available for moving to these high-need schools.

Samantha Ingram, assistant superintendent in Mobile County, told urban school leaders that teachers who worked on developing goals emphasized that staff development was critical to their success, and training was incorporated into the schools’ improvement plans. “Teachers felt that was nonnegotiable.”

In the end, the district’s intervention effort was a success, she said. Two of the five schools met their adequate yearly progress, and the rest showed significant gains toward their goals. At targeted elementary schools, for example, only 12 percent of third and fifth graders were scoring at proficient levels, but by the next spring, 77 percent were proficient.

Berliner: There are limits to school reform

The rush to improve student achievement through accountability systems and high-stakes testing overlooks the reality that many children live in poverty.

So argued David Berliner, a nationally recognized education professor and author of *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*, in a keynote address at the end of the conference.

Although Berliner’s remarks were hardly a surprise to board members, he never-

theless presented a strong argument that school reform efforts are undermined and subverted by what happens to children in poverty-stricken homes and neighborhoods.

In his remarks—and in accompanying written material—he hammered home this observation with statistics:

- In one study, the U.S. scored 25th out of 26 nations in the percentage of children in poverty—just ahead of Mexico.
- The number of “desperately poor”—those living at half the official poverty rate—has climbed nearly 50 percent since 1976.
- Research indicates that students living in poverty score lower on IQ tests, reflecting the impact of growing up in a poverty-stricken environment.
- The health of poor students is an obstacle to learning. A greater frequency of ear infections, untreated vision problems, and absences due to more frequent illness contribute to lower grades.
- The readiness of children to begin school is closely aligned with family income.
- School test scores are linked to poverty levels. As the enrollment of poor students increases in a school, the lower standardized test scores fall. A look at the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), for example, revealed that fourth-grade math scores

were 567 in schools with less than 10 percent student enrollment living in poverty but only 471 in schools where 75 percent of children live in poverty.

Such statistics, Berliner said, show that schools alone can help more students reach higher levels of academic achievement, and the nation’s policymakers need to address the issue of poverty in society. In a written handout, he shared a quote: ‘Attempting to fix inner-city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door.’

Professor proposes textbook adoption changes

The first known textbook protest in American occurred in New York City in the late 1830s, when the Catholic Church protested the way religion was presented in the Protestant-dominated public schools of the time.

But there have been many since—over how evolution, sex education, and other controversial topics have been dealt with, Joan DeFattore, professor of English and legal studies at the University of Delaware, told urban school leaders during a workshop on textbook adoption.

Many of these fights occur at the state level, where state boards of education—

particularly in California and Texas—try to balance educational needs, citizen complaints, and their own ideological views, she said.

None of this helps school boards address their students’ needs. But DeFattore suggested some alternatives: One is to rely less on textbooks and supplement classroom instruction with independent instructional material crafted by teachers or district committees—or developed in collaboration between the district and universities.

Material also could be drawn from commercial products, such as paperback editions of Shakespeare’s plays, college textbooks, or online material.

Another option would be to weaken the influence of California and Texas on textbook development by organizing smaller states into buying coalitions, DeFattore said. A logical extension of this idea would be to get states—or even the federal government—to work together on curriculum guidelines for use by textbook publishers.

All of these ideas have pitfalls, but as DeFattore noted in an essay she shared with school leaders, the future of American schools and their textbooks lies in the hands of two groups of people: “Activists who make the effort to participate in the discourse on instructional content, and nonparticipants who, by doing nothing, leave the field clear for them.” ■

Site visits showcase technology in Clark County



Alexandria Coronado, president of the Orange County Board of Education in Costa Mesa, Calif., smiles as she reads to students during the Lamping Elementary site visit.

During a tour of Clark County’s Advanced Technologies Academy (A-Tech), urban school leaders were given a presentation about social studies teacher Val Young’s website—and it proved an eye-opening lesson in the power of school technology.

With a few taps of a computer keyboard, Young showed school board members how her students can review classroom notes, maps, homework assignments, videos and photos, and research material on any classroom lesson or project.

“All my classroom lectures are on the website,” added the veteran teacher. “This is a powerful tool.”

The site visit to A-Tech—as well as to two outstanding Clark County elementary schools—was a featured activity of the 37th Annual CUBE Conference. And this nationally recognized high-tech school was

a favorite among conference attendees.

Opened in 1993, A-Tech is a magnet school that attempts to weave technology into everyday use in the classroom, said Principal Jane Oler. Although it offers courses in business and law, most of the school’s special programs focus on computer science, graphics, and design; engineering; and information and systems technology.

The school originally received additional district funding to pay for its high-tech program, but that money has fallen victim to budget constraints, she says. The school does, however, receive a \$50 per-pupil supplement from the state.

The emphasis on technology is not meant to dominate the school, Oler said. “We believe that technology is just a tool for teaching and learning. Our mission is to empower a diverse student body to suc-



Lisa Reickert, president of the Fort Bend, Texas, school board, and Jacqueline Taylor, president of the Youngstown (Ohio) City School District board, visit with students during the site visit to Frank Lamping Elementary School.

Darryl Porter, president of the Rochester (N.Y.) City School District board, watches students work during the Lamping site visit.



ceed in a highly competitive, technologically changing world.”

Yet, urban school leaders saw an impressive use of technology during their visit. School librarian George Breaz talked about students tapping into the school’s nearly 15,000 electronic books and 108 databases—a scale of resources that no school could afford to house in a traditional library.

What’s more, by relying on online resources, the school library is available to students 24 hours a day, he said. “The library is no longer a physical place, but is everywhere, every time in the world.”

The school website also is a resource, allowing students to review homework assignments, school calendars, student handbook, and other information, said school webmaster Richard Knoeppel. Parents often use the website to check student grades.

“On a Friday night, there are usually 50 students and parents on it, because the website is so powerful,” he said.

With limited time available, conference attendees had to make a painful decision at the start of the visits—determining which school to tour.

Those who opted to tour Harley Harmon Elementary School learned about a neighborhood school implementing the Reading First program and a dual language immersion program—both of which have proven to be successful for students.

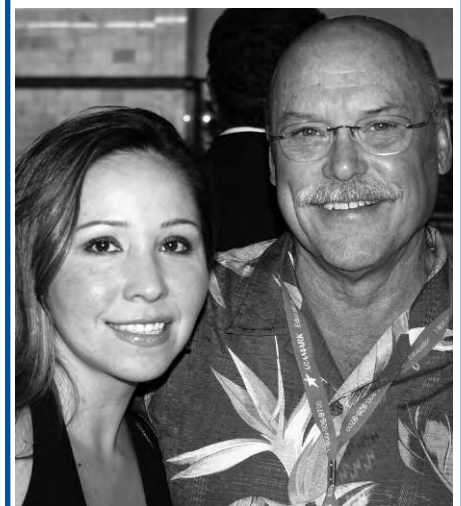
Other CUBE members visited Frank Lamping Elementary School, a science and technology center complete with science lab, wireless laptop computer lab, Space Shuttle Simulation Center, tri-desert garden, and a paleontology area that allows students to study fossils. ■

CUBE RECEPTION

Participants at the CUBE Annual Meeting took part in a reception along Las Vegas’ historic Fremont Street as part of the annual meeting. The reception, a staple of CUBE meetings, featured a dramatic light show in the historic Strip, which has been restored to its original glory. CUBE members rode buses from the Renaissance—a nongaming hotel—to Fremont Street following the Friday sessions. One unique aspect of the event was an opportunity to see the NSBA National Affiliate logo (below) up in lights during the Fremont Street show.



The NSBA National Affiliate logo shines in lights as part of the Fremont Street Experience.



Adelita Grijalva, board clerk for the Tucson Unified School District, poses with Superintendent Roger F. Pfeuffer during the CUBE Night Out.

CUBE BOARD

Continued from page 1

in light of the conference theme: Urban School Board Members: Strong Leaders Solving Complex Challenges.

Several complex topics were addressed during the four-day conference, which drew a record attendance of urban school leaders from nearly 80 school districts nationwide.

One topic that urban school boards addressed—and will continue to address in the coming months—is the attitude of students toward school. CUBE Chair Brian K. Perkins gave conference attendees an update on the CUBE school climate survey of more than 50,000 students nationwide.

“The news is not good about race,” he says. “Twenty-three out of 25 questions [on the survey] we found influenced by race. You see that different ethnic groups are experiencing school differently. People are going to pick up on that — and ask why. You need to be prepared for that.”

Racial issues—and their impact on student achievement—were also the topic of Glenn Singleton’s remarks as part of CUBE’s Conversation on Race Series.

Singleton, executive director of the San Francisco-based Pacific Educational Group, told urban school leaders that talk about the role of race on student achievement often is eclipsed by the attention given to the impact of socioeconomic issues.

The two are not necessarily interchangeable, he said. Some studies show that lower-income white students outperform more affluent minorities, indicating



David Berliner, author of *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools* (left), talks to CUBE Steering Committee member Warren Hayman before his speech at the CUBE Annual Meeting.

that race—in and of itself—has an impact on achievement.

“Don’t redefine racial factors into other terms that we’re more comfortable with,” he said. “In order to address the racial achievement disparity, it is necessary that we address race.”

Another important session at the conference was the keynote address on civility and responsible discourse by Phillip Boyle, president of Learning and Governing Associates, a North Carolina-based consulting group that helps corporate and public boards “better understand public problems, choices, and decisions.”

Boyle warned school leaders that learning to disagree in a civil manner has a huge impact on a school board’s effectiveness. “When you don’t communicate well ... the level of distrust goes up, mutual respect goes up, and people become more

intolerant of one another ... and there is a negative impact on the public.”

That session was followed by a second workshop on civility. Sponsored by the Communications Task Force, the session was conducted by Noel Hammatt, vice president of the East Baton Rouge Parish school board, and Jo Ann Yee, director of urban education and outreach for the California School Boards Association.

Hammatt emphasized the importance of human relations and personal trust when dealing with fellow board members. “We can’t wait until the board meetings to make things happen,” he said. “We have to build relationships ... make those personal contacts before divisive meetings, before those hard decisions have to be made. We have to find our common interests.”

Another highlight of the weekend was the CUBE Annual Banquet, where the Hillsborough County school district was named this year’s winner of the 2005 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.

“We applaud the Hillsborough school board and its community for taking risks and bringing change to ensure each student achieves,” NSBA Executive Director Anne L. Bryant said before the banquet. “This board is truly an outstanding role model for school boards across the country, whether urban, rural, or suburban.”

Urban school leaders also took advantage of a variety of workshops dealing with indoor air quality, improving high-poverty districts, textbook adoption, and alternative teacher pay plans. Board members also had an opportunity to visit three of Las Vegas’ most successful elementary and secondary schools. ■

2006 CUBE MEETINGS CALENDAR

CUBE Issues Forum

Held in conjunction with NSBA’s Federal Relations Network Conference

February 4, 2006
Grand Hyatt Hotel
Washington, D.C.

CUBE Site Visit and Urban Programming

April 6-10, 2006
Hotel InterContinental Chicago
Chicago, IL

CUBE 38th Annual Conference

September 28-October 1, 2006
Phoenix, AZ

CUBE Congressional Luncheon

CUBE members only

February 7, 2006

CUBE Issues Seminar

June 23-25, 2006
Renaissance Chicago Hotel
Chicago, IL

Visit CUBE’s Web site for up-to-date information on what’s going on with CUBE. Members can read the latest version of *Urban Advocate*, download upcoming conference brochures and handouts from previous meetings, find links to all member districts, and much more.

www.nsba.org/cube