



# Executive Summary

**N**ationwide, low-performing schools are high on the agenda of urban school reform leaders. The current focus reverses the neglect that has plagued these schools for years. Many of them are situated in distressed communities that show the results of years of disinvestment, communities where a growing concentration of poverty and its consequences has taken a social and economic toll. These issues spill over into the schools. These schools, nevertheless, must teach all children to high standards of achievement and mastery, with no excuses.

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***We believe that reciprocal accountability is critical to creating schools that are successful in teaching and learning.***

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Most urban schools serve children of color and therefore are vulnerable to society's preconceptions or biases regarding race and ethnicity, income,

and class. But problems affecting academic achievement are just as likely to begin in the schools. Teachers' low expectations for student performance, whether out of misplaced sympathy, burn-out or frustration, are self-fulfilling prophecies. Low expectations produce a correspondingly low level of curriculum that is taught in an unengaging manner, that results in low levels of student achievement.

Despite school reform efforts during the 1980s and 1990s, achievement gaps persist among low-income, African American, Latino and Native American students. To close these gaps, we must honestly examine widely held values and beliefs about race, ethnicity, social status, gender and disability, as well as assumptions about children's achievement potential. The central question is will all children have access to real learning opportunities? Will schools provide all children with qualified teachers who have high expectations for their achievement, rigorous programs, state-of-the-art materials and equipment, and stimulating enrichment activities? Genuine accountability for student achievement is grounded in considerations of access and equity. If efforts to make low-performing schools more accountable for student achievement do not overtly respond to this issue, they are, at best, ineffective and, at the worst, inequitable.

In the 1990s, urban schools, and public education in general, have been undergoing fundamental review. Broad and accelerating changes in society are demanding higher standards of performance than ever before from the nation's public schools. In response, national, state and local leaders are developing academic standards for what children should know and be able to do at specific stages in their education. Almost every state

has adopted or is in the final stages of adopting standards, and many states are aligning teacher certification, testing and accountability provisions to the standards.

Within this context, school districts across the country have decided to intervene and take an active role in addressing low school performance. The interventions are long overdue and welcome, if done well. The high visibility, take-charge leadership of some urban superintendents has a broadly beneficial result of increasing public confidence in urban public education. It is important, however, to explore these interventions to see if they result in serious improvement in teaching and learning in schools. It would be unfortunate if the only results were slightly improved standardized test scores that provided a positive “spin” for political leaders.



The Cross City Campaign has focused on equity and accountability since school reform leaders from Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and Seattle founded the organization in 1993. As school districts across the country began aggressive interventions in low-performing schools, we decided to examine these interventions and, at the other end of the spectrum, initiatives that recognize school success.


This report describes, analyzes and draws lessons and recommendations from the current interventions, which are primarily district-led. Our examination also provides an entry point into an inquiry into reciprocal accountability—strategies and systems where responsibility is shared among schools, communities, school districts, and the state. We believe that reciprocal accountability is critical to creating schools that are successful in teaching and learning. Thus, we are interested in whether, and how, current interventions can lead in the long run to practices where each stakeholder in the school system has a strong role to play and carries out his or her functions interdependently.


The information and analyses in this report have been drawn from dozens of interviews; reviews of district documents and the literature on interventions in low-performing schools; and meetings and discussions among a wide range of participants from central offices, schools, and communities. This collaborative approach has helped to shape the writing of this document.

## PRINCIPLES OF ACCOUNTABILITY


Educational policymakers discuss accountability by asking: “Who is or should be accountable to whom? For what? How should the “what” be measured and assessed? What happens as a result?” Our response to these questions is that genuine systems of educational accountability promote high levels of achievement for all students. We believe that real accountability is school-based and includes strong roles for parents and community. Accountability pertains to all aspects of school life—school autonomy, standards, curriculum, instruction, professional development, assessment, schools organized as learning communities, school budgeting and school size.

Over the past two years, educators and community leaders have worked with the Cross City Campaign to develop principles that undergird a good, reciprocal system of accountability. They are organized under three goals: equity, reciprocity, and comprehensiveness and coherence.

 **Equity:** All children—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, economic circumstance, disability, and English language proficiency—receive the education they require in order to achieve to high academic standards.

 **Reciprocity:** Principals, teachers, parents, students, community members, central office administrators, and the state share roles and responsibilities for student achievement. Each

institutional level has full authority to carry out its roles and responsibilities. Parents, students, and community members are recognized as essential partners and accorded full respect.

 **Comprehensiveness and Coherence:** Students learn in different ways and bring different strengths and cultural assets to the school. Thus, the school community organizes many resources and strategies to support the variety of ways in which students learn.

An ideal system of accountability would result in the achievement of these goals.

## INTERVENTIONS IN SIX CITIES

In 1996, the Cross City Campaign began to look at intervention initiatives that were underway in six urban school districts: Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and Seattle. These interventions have largely been initiated by central offices, and they have affected widely varying numbers of schools in each district. Initially, the Denver initiative took place in only three of the district’s 115 schools. At the other extreme, Chicago’s intervention is affecting 140 of the system’s 583 schools.

Our study focused on three major areas:

What **indicators** are used to judge school success or failure? Are data disaggregated to reveal gaps in student achievement? Are the measures one-time snapshots or do they represent school trends over time?

What **processes** do school districts employ to engage the schools, parents and community in supporting improvement? Are the processes leading to stronger school-based authority and responsibility? To reciprocal accountability?

What are the key characteristics of the interventions' **implementation**? Do successful schools share their experiences with less successful schools? Are the interventions isolated or part of a larger, systemwide reform initiative? What funds and assistance are provided?

Ultimately, we wanted to know whether the interventions are quick political fixes or serious commitments to education, whether the actions being taken are likely to result in sustained and sustainable school improvement and whether they advance the cause of reciprocal accountability so that continuous school improvement becomes the norm.



## Chicago

Chicago's current effort to reform its schools began with the passage of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act. In 1995 an amendment gave Chicago's mayor the authority to appoint a new scaled-down Chicago School Reform Board of Trustees and a central office team headed up by a chief executive officer (CEO), Paul G. Vallas. In that year the Board of Trustees and the CEO created a new Office of Accountability and gave it the mandate to identify and support desired educational outcomes and standards of performance for the Chicago Public School System of 567 schools and 421,000 students.

Chicago's approach to intervention is organized along a continuum of corrective actions concentrated in three processes: remediation, probation, and reconstitution. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administrators look at standardized test scores from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) in elementary schools and the Tests of Academic Proficiency (TAP) in high schools to determine when to place schools on intervention. In addition, the Illinois State Board of Education administers the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) statewide. The state identifies schools with declining IGAP scores on its academic early warning list and provides the first warning for Chicago schools that they may be headed for intervention.

Remediation is a relatively nonintrusive, early intervention process that is triggered when only 15 to 20 percent of a school's students are performing at or above national norms on the reading portion of the ITBS, or when a school is on the state's academic early warning list. A team from the CPS' Office of Accountability visits the school to assess its needs. Based on the recommendations from the site visit, the school develops a remediation plan, which does not require school board approval.

Probation signals that either a school has failed to correct its deficiencies under remediation, or that a school's problems are more severe than remediation can adequately address. CPS places a school on probation when fewer than 15 percent of its students perform at or above national norms in reading. A probation school must develop a corrective action plan and receive school board approval to implement the plan. Staff from the intervention unit of the Accountability Office

monitor plan implementation. A “probation management team” also monitors school progress and provides support. The team consists of a probation manager, an external partner, a business manager, a representative from the regional education office, a Local School Council (LSC) member and the school’s principal.

Reconstitution is the most severe intervention and applies to schools that, after a maximum of one year on probation, have failed to make sufficient progress in correcting educational deficiencies. In reconstituted schools the principal may be replaced, all staff must resign but may reapply to the school and undergo an interview and new LSC elections may be ordered.

Building on a base of Chicago schools working in partnership with an extensive group of external agencies since the 1988 reform, the CPS administration assembled a network of “external partners” to provide technical assistance and support to schools on remediation or probation. The External Partner program costs \$9 million annually. Approximately 10 area colleges, universities and educational organizations, with purported capabilities to raise student performance and to customize their assistance to meet the individual needs of schools, are providing these services.

During the 1996-97 school year, CPS placed 109 schools (71 elementary and 38 high schools) on probation. At the end of the 1996-97 school year, 25 schools were eligible to be removed from this status because they had raised their test scores to at least the 20 percent level. Despite the gains, CPS removed only one high school and eight

elementary schools from probation. The district elected to continue oversight and support for one more year to solidify the increases. In the 1997-98 school year, one more high school and 14 elementary schools were placed on probation, a net gain of six schools. Additionally, seven of the probation high schools were reconstituted.

In late 1997, the central administration developed an additional process for identifying schools that may need intervention. The new process serves as an early warning to schools that are beginning to experience decline. This “Systemwide Accountability Plan” provides a framework for evaluating schools that are experiencing declines in test scores and for providing rewards to schools that are improving academic achievement. Progress is still measured by the ITBS and TAP tests. Schools are grouped into three levels: Level A schools show either an increase, no change, or a decline of less than two percentage points; Level B schools show a one-year decline of more than two percentage points; and Level C schools show a two-year decline of more than three percentage points.

The central administration intends to reward Level A schools for targeted completion of set goals. Level B schools are required to develop a self-evaluative plan to increase scores. Level C schools are provided assistance in developing their school improvement plans, workshops on standardized tests, and a business manager or intern to allow the principal to focus on instruction. The probation and remediation processes will continue for the most seriously underperforming schools and for those schools on the state’s academic early

warning list. Under the new system, schools that continue to decline could be downgraded to a lower level, placed on probation or reconstituted.



## Denver

In early 1997, the Denver school board authorized Superintendent Irv Moscovitz (appointed in 1994) to undertake the radical procedure of reconstituting a selected number of consistently poorly performing elementary schools. The adoption of the School Redesign and Remediation Plan signaled the intent of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) to take action on failing schools and put a spotlight on accountability in the 115-school, 68,000 student district.

DPS is currently encountering challenges similar to those that other urban school districts face, including fiscal constraints (exacerbated by a constitutional limit on spending), a poverty-impacted student population, and changing student demographics. After years of decline, DPS enrollment has grown by several thousand students over the past four years. Most of the enrollment growth comes from low-income areas, and many of the new students are Mexican immigrants.

DPS' School Redesign and Remediation Plan contains three levels of intervention: remediation, partial redesign, and full redesign. A school on remediation is given a specified amount of time to reorganize its methodologies and instructional atmosphere. Partial redesign and full redesign are aimed at changing the organizational and instructional environment of the school. During partial

redesign, a portion of teaching and other school staff positions are posted as vacant. The principal and classified staff may also be reassigned.

Redesign causes all teaching and other school staff positions to be vacated, and the principal is reassigned. At both partial redesign and redesign schools, current teachers may apply for positions for which they are qualified.

Throughout the spring of 1997, a team of central office administrators, principals, teachers, and representatives from the Denver Classroom Teachers Association worked together to identify schools that demonstrated a pattern of low achievement. They also conducted site reviews to determine how organization and school culture contributed to the schools' poor performance. The team initially looked blindly (the names of the schools were kept anonymous) at the 10 elementary schools in the district with the lowest aggregated test scores over the preceding five years. Results were examined in particular for the number of students in each school who scored below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the reading portion of the ITBS. The team also looked at results from the district's assessment showing achievement levels in language and math, and at alternative school-level assessments.

The team identified four elementary schools as "candidates for redesign" and paid site visits to all four. In May 1997, the team identified two schools for full redesign. A third school was placed on remediation. The team did not recommend any formal intervention for the fourth school because it determined that the existing staff had a workable strategy to address the identified problems.

The School Redesign and Remediation Plan outlines additional resources that the district may offer the two schools that are undergoing redesign: 1) \$100,000 was allocated in the budget, \$50,000 for each of the two redesign schools. The uses of these funds are mutually agreed to by the school and the Department of Elementary Education. 2) Extra help also was provided. Two literacy specialists (out of 7.5 available to all 81 elementary schools) were assigned as a priority to the redesign schools on a part-time basis. One of the schools, with a large bilingual population, also received a bilingual specialist. In addition, each school has a master teacher (a support that is available to other schools that are not redesign schools as well and that is acquired by staff reallocation), without other classroom assignments, who works full-time on instructional issues.



## Los Angeles

In 1997, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) began a transition as Ruben Zacarias, a 31 year veteran of the school system and deputy superintendent since 1992, was promoted to superintendent. In recent years, LAUSD has been moving toward systemic reform in response to increasing pressure from parents, citizens, the business community, voucher proponents, and those in favor of breaking up the nation's second largest district of 636 schools and 680,000 students into smaller districts.

In one of the earliest policy initiatives of his administration, Superintendent Zacarias announced that the district would intervene in the 100 lowest performing schools during the 1997-1998 school year. Standardized test scores from the spring 1996 California Test of Basic Skills

(CTBS) were the basis for school identification. Once identified, each school was invited to bring a team to meet with the superintendent to discuss its data and plans, the superintendent's goals, and help that would be available. Schools brought teams that might include the principal, a union representative, teachers and parents. Superintendent Zacarias conducted these meetings during his first five months in office. Each school was to develop an improvement plan with improved results expected by June 1998.

The central office provided two kinds of support to the 100 schools: 1) Some \$9 million—roughly \$90,000 per school—was allocated to assist schools with their improvement plans; and 2) Veteran teachers could apply for and be designated as master teachers to assist the large number of new teachers at these schools. As a result, the number of master teachers at the 100 schools doubled.



## New York

Currently, New York City schools are undergoing intervention from two levels of the school system. Schools Under Registration Review (SURR), a state-mandated program initiated in 1989, is the primary vehicle for intervening in low-performing schools. In addition, in 1996, New York City's Chancellor, Rudolph F. Crew (appointed in 1995) created a special subdistrict called the Chancellor's District to directly intervene in, and restructure, low-performing schools identified under the state program. During the 1996-1997 school year, there were 92 city schools identified as SURR within the nation's largest district of 1,136 schools (in 1997-1998) and over one million students.

New York state regulations stipulate that every public school in the state must be registered by the state Board of Regents. No school district may operate a public school whose registration has been revoked. The SURR process is designed to correct situations that impede quality education and to measurably improve student performance. The New York State Education Department (SED) identifies low-performing schools, conducts registration review visits, offers technical assistance and support services to these schools, and monitors school progress.

Each year the state gives a series of standardized tests covering certain subject areas for students in specified grades. At least 90 percent of a school's students who take the state tests are expected to score at or above the statewide performance benchmarks. The State Education Department (SED) analyzes the test scores for each school to identify schools that are farthest from meeting these minimum standards. Those schools that most need improvement are identified as SURR. The department also looks at a school's dropout rate, which should not exceed five percent.

In addition, any school identified as being a "poor learning environment" may be required to undergo registration review. SED can identify a school as a "poor learning environment" if the school fails to meet state performance criteria: if it is the subject of persistent parent complaints; or if it has conditions that threaten the health, safety or educational welfare of its students. Such conditions may include, but are not limited to, high rates of student absenteeism, excessive suspension rates, inordinate levels of violence, and violations of building health and safety standards.

Once the school has been identified, the local school district has an appeal option within the SURR process. The SURR process also includes a warning from the state that the school may lose its registration, and it requires public notification of the school's status. The public notification must include both a direct communication to parents and disclosure at the next public school board meeting. The warning includes a specific summary of the educational progress that the school must demonstrate before it may be considered "no longer at risk." The registration review visit takes place after a school is identified. The state sends in a team made up of administrators, teachers, union representatives, education specialists, parents, and State Education Department staff. The review team visits the school for four days and provides a report to the school and the district that includes recommendations for improvement. The school and school district must each produce an improvement plan based on the review team's findings. The state then monitors the implementation of the two plans. The SURR school has three full academic years to demonstrate acceptably improved student results.

In October 1995, the state's commissioner of education informed the New York City Board of Education that 16 city schools identified as SURR for nearly a decade would be placed under Corrective Action for failure to demonstrate progress. Corrective Action is a SURR category that signals a school is in danger of registration revocation if student performance does not significantly improve within a given time frame. Each Corrective Action school is required to undergo "redesign," a process that—with full support of the union—closes the school and reopens it as a new school. In response, in early



1996, Chancellor Rudolph F. Crew created a special structure, the Chancellor's District, to carry out the city's direct intervention in Corrective Action schools that failed to demonstrate the capacity (or the willingness) to redesign. In fiscal years 1997 and 1998, the Crew administration spent more than \$7 million in special allocations for the Chancellor's District.

The support for Chancellor's District schools includes: recruitment and professional support of qualified staff, reallocation of resources to strengthen improvement efforts, modification of instructional programs, identification and promotion of successful instruction models, and access for parents to meaningful involvement and participation in the redesign of the school.

Each school undergoing redesign must focus on student literacy and establish a school-based planning team to organize, develop, and carry out the redesign plan. The school is supported by on-site technical assistance in both process (team-building, school assessment) and content (instructional strategies, curriculum). A school remains assigned to the Chancellor's District until there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate it is able to make adequate progress toward meeting student performance targets.

**Philadelphia**

An accountability framework known as the Professional Responsibility System (PRS) is a cornerstone of the Philadelphia School District's comprehensive Children Achieving reform plan. David W. Hornbeck, superintendent, introduced

the plan within six months of his appointment in 1994. Standards and a new assessment instrument are elements of this system. Other features include a teacher/administrator performance index, individual school performance targets, and rewards and sanctions based on school performance in the district of 261 schools and 213,000 students.



PRS is framed around the principle of continuous improvement. A baseline performance level is established in key areas for each school in the district, and each school's growth is measured against its own baseline. The indicators that are factored into the performance index are: Stanford-9/APRENDA test scores; student success at the next level (the proportion of elementary students from a given school who are promoted on time as they move through middle school; and the proportion of middle school students who graduate from high school four years later); student attendance; staff attendance; promotion rates (first through eighth grades); and persistence rates (ninth grade to high school graduation). The composite score from these indicators permits the evaluation of a school's current status, the setting of performance targets, and the measurement of school progress on key student outcomes.

All schools are expected to reach the standard of 95 percent of students performing at what the central office has defined as a “proficiency” level within one student generation, or 12 years. While taking into account that schools are starting from different places, the system nevertheless includes the academic progress of low-performing students as well as higher-achieving students as part of the performance target for each school.

Performance is calculated on a two-year accountability cycle. Schools received their initial baseline in the spring of 1996. At the end of the first accountability cycle, which ended with 1998 testing, schools were categorized based on performance—and received rewards, support, or penalties accordingly.

In September 1997, the central administration decided to take an interim look at school performance based on single-year index scores from the 1996-1997 school year. The district reported substantial progress with increases in every component of the performance index. The index scores also indicated that the performance of 13 schools had declined. 10-member school support teams visited the identified schools, spending three days at each site. The teams were composed of principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and education specialists, as well as district-level representatives who served as team leaders. Prior to the visits, the teams received two days of training to guide the performance review.

After the site visits were concluded, the teams developed their recommendations with milestones in a written report that was circulated to staff and

parents of students at the visited schools. The teams also debriefed with the schools’ principals, faculty, and parents to discuss their findings. The schools were given an opportunity to respond to the findings and prepare school commentaries. A review panel consisting of central administration cabinet members and representatives from the teachers’ and principals’ unions, business community, Home School Association, and higher education convened and reviewed the team reports and the school commentaries. The review panel’s decision was the determining factor in the implementation of the support teams’ recommendations and progress milestones. The first progress report deadline was January 1998, less than four months after school identification.

This process provided no new school-based funds. Rather, the expectations were that the strategies employed by the identified schools would involve better use of current resources at the central office, cluster, and school levels.



## Seattle

Seattle’s 97 public schools serve 47,000 students from very diverse backgrounds. For the past 20 years, available data have made clear that there is a problem that Seattle has labeled “disproportionality.” Many minority students, particularly African American students, fall farther and farther behind, until they are among the lowest performers in numbers disproportionate to their total population within the district. In fact, over one-fourth of them do not graduate at all. Two decades of rhetoric, failed programs, worry, and attention have not solved this problem.

Superintendent John Stanford was hired by the board in the summer of 1995 with a mandate to improve student achievement. Earlier in the spring of 1995, the school board adopted a policy for annual review of each school, with attention to schools not meeting specific criteria. A team of principals, teachers, and central office staff launched the School Effectiveness Initiative to implement the policy. The process had two goals: 1) to identify schools that need support and intervention; and 2) to identify effective practices worthy of recognition and replication.

In 1996, the school board set academic achievement targets on the ITBS for all schools. The minimum goal is to reduce the total numbers of students scoring in the two lowest quartiles by 10 percent and 15 percent respectively, and to increase the total number scoring in the two highest quartiles by 5 percent each year. Each school receives its test score information in the fall and then develops an educational plan to achieve the target test outcomes for the following spring. The 1997-98 contract with the teachers' union includes two student-free days at the beginning of the school year to allow teachers time to review test data and work on the educational plan.

Under the School Effectiveness Initiative, school profiles are created for each school using a wide variety of longitudinal measures. The indicators include scores from the ITBS; direct writing assessments; curriculum-based assessments; attendance/truancy rates; dropout rates; graduation rates; climate and satisfaction surveys (from students, staff, and parents); and number of suspensions, expulsions, and weapons incidents.

These data are assembled as a "school effectiveness profile" for each school, comparing the school to itself over three years and to overall district standards and averages. The academic achievement data, with socioeconomic indicators factored in, are given more weight than other data.



Two committees, a five-person screening team and a 12-person review panel—both composed of principals, teachers, central office administrators, and union representatives—review the data for each school. They look for schools whose data show either downward trends or exemplary progress when compared against themselves. They initially reviewed 29 schools whose scores were troubling, as well as 30 schools whose data were positive. The principals of the 29 schools were notified and asked to come before the review team with a school team to discuss their data.

The interview gave the schools an opportunity to present additional information and to disagree with or interpret the data. Following these interviews, the screening team reviewed the data again. This process narrowed the list from 29 to nine schools that were identified as Focus Schools. The identity of the nine schools was kept confidential.

Focus Schools receive increasingly intensive intervention and support if they do not show improvement over a three-year period, which is the maximum length of time a school is assigned Focus School status. Progress is monitored each year by the screening team through the data prepared for the annual school profile, and the superintendent's evaluation of the principals involved. If improvement is not evident at the end of each of the three years, the intervention becomes more prescriptive.

The 1995-1996 school year was the first year of implementation. Three main supports were provided to the Focus Schools: 1) The central office allocated a total of \$89,000, approximately \$9,000 per school, to spend on activities such as staff development and time for staff to create an improvement plan; 2) The schools were given preference for sending teachers to professional development opportunities that were available through grants and special funds; and 3) A core group from central office was assigned to visit each school on a regular basis. These intervention teams, as they were called, were composed of two or three central office administrators, drawn mostly from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and sometimes included retired principals and union representatives. The Focus Schools had considerable discretion in developing their improvement plan.

Twelve schools were added to the Focus Schools List in the 1996-1997 school year. Based on what worked well and poorly in year one, the process was modified in year two. Schools were pushed to focus specifically on one area of improvement. If they were unable to determine their own focus, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction directed them to one of the reform models being implemented in the district. A clear chain of responsibility was instituted to oversee school help, though on-site intervention teams were discontinued. Many of the principals were moved to other schools. The \$9,000 in discretionary money was to be directly linked to the school's improvement plan. By the end of year two, some of the first year schools had made sufficient progress to move to a second level of intervention called the "M and M" group, or those schools that receive monitoring and money to ensure that gains are maintained. In the third year (1997-1998), six new schools became Focus Schools, and five schools were identified as requiring more careful monitoring because of concern regarding their progress.

## **INTERVENTION ISSUES AND ANALYSIS**

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Our examination of district and state interventions surfaced issues that were common across cities. In light of these issues, we posed the question to ourselves: "What would an intervention in a low-performing school look like if it were meeting a standard of excellence?" Thus, to undergird our assessment of the initiatives, we developed a set of intervention standards that address indicators, process, and implementation. We then assessed the interventions in light of these standards.

## Indicators

**The standard:** Multiple indicators from multiple sources, reviewed over time, measure the success of teaching and learning and allow schools to evaluate their own performance and compare their performance with peer schools, the district as a whole, and schools in similar districts.

**Key issue:** There is an over-reliance on standardized test scores for measuring school and student performance.

### ✓ FINDING 1

**Standardized test scores are carrying inordinate weight.**

Rather than using a broader set of indicators of school performance over time, central administrations use standardized testing almost exclusively to identify low-performing schools and to measure school improvement. Increasingly, “school success” is being equated with higher test scores.

### ✓ FINDING 2

**The heavy emphasis by central administrations on increasing standardized test scores is working at cross-purposes with the systemwide goal of teaching all children to high standards.**

High-stakes standardized testing is diverting attention away from the importance of good instructional practice. Schools that spend months concentrating on test preparation do not have time to implement high standards.

### ✓ FINDING 3

**The focus on standardized testing is also taking precedence over monitoring and tracking individual student performance.**

Although each of our cities has recently adopted and begun to implement content standards describing what students should know and be able to do, we found less emphasis on assessing the learning of individual students.

### ✓ FINDING 4

**Disaggregated data are not being provided to schools to facilitate their responses to achievement gaps associated with race, ethnicity, gender, disability, English language proficiency, and socioeconomic level.**

Data should drive decisions at the school level, but we found little evidence of data being used to tailor solutions aimed at improving instruction for particular students or groups of students.

## Process

**The standard:** The intervention process is fair, mutually respectful, and public. It engages all stakeholders—principals, teachers, parents, students, community members, unions, site councils, and central office and state administrators.

**Key issue:** A low priority is placed on shaping relationships among stakeholders and on building ownership to improve student achievement at the school level.



FINDING

5

**Central administrations are exercising energetic and determined leadership to intervene in low-performing schools but are alienating school-level personnel with their tactics.**

Driven by a strong commitment to improve student achievement and by mounting public intolerance of failing schools, central office leaders are using high visibility tactics in high stakes interventions. Their bold, decisive actions, which heavily involve the media, successfully communicate a sense of urgency and, thus, gain a measure of public support. These same actions, however, also are breeding misunderstanding, fear, cynicism, and mistrust among the school constituencies who must be involved in the work to make significant student achievement improvements.



FINDING

6

**Central administrations are stifling school-initiated accountability.**

On the one hand, school districts and state agencies must set clear policies, develop sufficient structure, provide appropriate resources and oversight, and implement real consequences for low-performing schools that do not improve within prescribed time frames. It is equally important, however, to recognize that to achieve genuine accountability, school districts and state agencies must increase or preserve autonomy and enhance flexibility at the school level (including both budgets and programs) so that schools can actively engage in their own achievement of districtwide standards.



FINDING

7

**The interventions have not only been “top-down,” they have been “inside.”**

Generally, parents, community members, and school site councils have been on the sidelines of school change. Unions have slowly begun to participate as calls for school-level accountability have increased. Clear intervention roles have not been defined, nor have the requisite resources been made available for meaningful engagement. New patterns of participation among all stakeholders, focused on school quality, must emerge if there is going to be positive and sustained school change.

## Implementation

**The standard:** The intervention is undertaken in a manner that builds capacity at the local school level to strengthen teaching and learning and results in significant improvement in achievement for all students.

**Key issue:** Major investment is needed to build local school capacity to improve teaching and learning.



FINDING

8

**Although additional sums are being allocated, the investment in professional development at the school level remains woefully inadequate.**

In general, the interventions have brought three sources of support to schools: new central office structures, extra funds, and external help. The latter two elements, however, have varied tremendously. School districts and state agencies are reluctant to publicly address the scope and cost of the support that must be provided to help schools improve. Current actions follow years of fragmented activity or inattention to improving teachers' and principals' knowledge and skills.



## FINDING

9

**We found little evidence that the interventions were organized around a research base of successful instructional practices or around connections to successful models of interventions in low-performing schools.**

Moreover, the interventions varied in terms of whether they were implemented as a strategy encompassed in a comprehensive systemwide effort or as an isolated, nonsystemic initiative.



## FINDING

10

**At the end of “round one” of school interventions, political considerations and timelines are taking precedence over educational requirements.**

There is considerable distance between the stated goals of the interventions and the reality of the supports and measures in place to improve low-performing schools.

## IMPROVING DISTRICT-LED INTERVENTIONS

There are essential roles that school districts can and must play to ensure school-level success. Only top leadership in the school district can send a systemwide message on equity—that low performance will no longer be tolerated in any school or with any group of students. Only central office leaders can adopt districtwide standards and hold all schools accountable for meeting these standards. The district negotiates and agrees to contracts with all employees agreements that are critical for planning and implementing effective interventions and school improvement strategies. Only school districts can reconstitute a school, removing or replacing all staff—an action that is sometimes necessary to break a culture of failure at a school.

It is school districts and school boards that must ensure that all schools have the support and the authority they need to transform practice. Only the school board can review, revise, or eliminate district policies that contribute to poor school performance—policies governing principal, teacher, and student assignments; teacher hiring; budget authority; and data collection and dissemination. The district must make certain that every school has adequate funding and that resources are distributed equitably. The school district can most effectively send a consistent message to the public about the importance of all students achieving to high standards. And the superintendent can lead the effort to build a broad base of public support for the investment necessary to improve low-performing schools.

If, however, one were designing an ideal system of intervening in low-performing schools—a system that had as its goal significant improvement in teaching and learning—central office interventions would not be the starting point. They would be an important last resort, after careful investment in other approaches. School districts can catalyze action, but they cannot improve educational practice. That work must happen at the school, with active parent and community participation.

The very nature of a large organization works against the carefully tailored, school-based work that serious educational change requires. By and large, central administrations as primary actors have tended to use generalized and one-size-fits-all reform programs or approaches rather than a particular approach that is designed for a specific school and that draws on its strengths. While schools may have had years of low performance, most interventions expect schools to make major gains in very short periods of time. We agree that the work is urgent—students' futures are at stake. But if serious educational change is desired, it will not occur in one school year. The initiatives have resulted in some test score gains, but that is not the same as improved schools.

## Recommendations

When examined against standards for an effective intervention aimed at better teaching and learning, these initiatives fall far short. We offer the following recommendations for improving district-led interventions.

## Indicators

### **Develop multiple indicators of school performance and review them over time.**

Any high stakes intervention should be based on a series of indicators of school and student performance, the trends of which are reviewed over time. These indicators should include—but not be limited to—scores on standardized tests that have been aligned to a district's standards; other methods of assessing student performance (direct teacher observation, teacher-designed tests, student portfolios, exhibits, and so on); student attendance; student suspension/expulsion rates; dropout and mobility rates; course offerings; numbers of students taking college preparation courses; success at the next level; graduation rates; teacher attendance; level of teacher education and percentage of teachers who are teaching in their areas of certification; and measures of parental engagement.

### **Disaggregate data for every school by race, ethnicity, gender, primary language, socioeconomic status, and disabilities.**

In order to thoughtfully judge school and student performance, data needs to be differentiated so that the parts, as well as the whole, are visible. Various groups of students at a school may be performing very differently. In fact, increasing a school's average test scores may mask the failure rates among some students.



**3 Use disaggregated data to close the performance gap among students.**

Improving performance in low-performing schools must include all students, especially those scoring in the lowest quartiles on standardized tests and doing least well on other measures. Improving performance for all students will require close attention to disaggregated data. Tailor specific strategies for different students to ensure their progress.

**4 Make the use of data the norm for school improvement planning and decision-making.**

Parents, site councils, community leaders, teachers, and principals should be sophisticated data users. This will allow them to make wise judgments about school progress and share in planning and implementing strategies for improvement. Achieving this, however, will require that data be organized and user-friendly. Central administrators, principals and teachers, site council members, parents, and community leaders need to work together to identify which data are needed, how they will be prepared, and when they will be made available to schools. Data review and reflection should be built into the regular school schedule, and there also must be time allowed for public discussion of the data. Then, the information that is acquired through data can be incorporated into the school improvement plan.

**5 Work with schools to develop multiple, alternative methods of assessing student progress; work to make those assessment methods educationally credible and publicly understood and accepted.**

Standardized, norm-referenced test scores carry enormous political weight. Although they were designed for narrow purposes and do not measure student progress over time, they are, in fact, widely used for many purposes, including high stakes decision-making. At the same time, educators and community leaders are developing new educational methods of assessing student work that are not standardized. Student portfolios and public demonstrations of student mastery are only two of many examples. These approaches need to be fully developed and shared across sites. Once these measures have become sound and reliable, education and community leaders will need to create and implement careful strategies to enhance these assessments' political and educational acceptance.

**Processes****1 Help schools develop a process for regular self-diagnosis.**

In order to help schools take responsibility for their own improvement—before a district intervenes—schools, districts, and states should work together to develop and implement a regular process for school self-study and planning. When this kind of rigorous self-diagnosis exposes problems and issues, schools and the district should design and agree on the type of assistance and support that will be available.

## **2** Notify and interview schools identified for intervention before there is a public announcement.

In some cities, a punitive climate was created because school staff, students, and parents first learned about the impending intervention when they saw their school named in the newspaper. This is not a good way to begin the partnership that will be required if schools are to improve. Before schools are identified for intervention, they should be notified and given a chance to discuss the data on their performance. Before the public is notified, schools should have time to inform teachers and parents and begin to enlist them in an improvement process.



## **3** Engage principals and teachers.

In the relatively small number of reconstituted schools, teachers and principals are removed from their jobs and have to reapply if they wish to return to that school. In most low-performing schools involved in interventions, however, the same principal and teachers will remain at the school and will be the primary leaders of the improvement. School district administrators, therefore, must walk

a line between directives and encouragement, between tough love and support, between no excuses and respect, and between central office dictates and local diagnosis and action.

## **4** Enlist school site councils, parents, and community members as major allies in the intervention and improvement process.

Most of the interventions to date have been “insider” operations, with little attention to, or support for, the critical role that parents, site councils, and other members of the school community can and should play. Parent and community participation occurs most effectively at the school level, but the central administration has an important role to fulfill in encouraging and promoting this participation. Make data publicly available, create improvement plans that involve strong roles for these leaders, and enlist the community resources to which they have access.

## **Implementation**

### **Adopt a timeline for improvement that communicates both urgency and the time needed to make substantial educational improvements.**

Some of the interventions have signaled their superficiality by demanding major changes in a few months. But serious school change takes time. If interventions are comprehensive and use a coherent instructional improvement framework, they will, by necessity, require more than one year to implement. Improvements should be measurable every year, but a serious and sustainable turnaround of a low-performing school is a multi-year effort.

## 2 **Make a major investment in supporting the professional growth of teachers and principals.**

Teaching all children to high standards and expecting high levels of achievement for all students requires excellent teaching by all teachers. Although teaching transformation should be viewed as the single most important intervention in improving low-performing schools, it has not been a focus. The work required to transform teaching should be school-based and employ multiple strategies within and across schools. To be done well, transforming teaching practices requires both a significant infusion of new funds and a redeployment of current funds.

## 3 **Provide high-quality external help that has a “track record” of improving low-performing schools.**

Low-performing schools need help to change what is often a culture of failure. That help should be substantive, sustained, and of proven quality. It can be provided by an educational organization, a higher education institution, a successful school, or a community group—whoever the entities are, they should be able to demonstrate their successful results in other, similar circumstances. School communities should play a leading role in designing the help needed and in choosing among potential support providers.

## 4 **Engage successful schools as mentors for their low-performing peers.**

Schools that have succeeded in educating students well in urban communities are essential sources of help to their less successful peers. In most urban school districts, however, there is no culture of

cross-school exchange and support. Such a culture is needed in order to tap the peer-to-peer mentoring that could provide one of the most productive sources of support.

## 5 **Revise or eliminate school district policies that contribute to low performance.**

Just as they demand improvements at the school level, school districts have important work to do to put their own houses in order. Working with principals, site councils, teachers, and parents, they must make a commitment to identify and then revise (or eliminate) their own policies and practices that stymie school improvement. Policies that might need change include, but are not limited to, teacher hiring and assignment, principal tenure, student assignment, resource allocation, and data preparation and reporting.

## **TOWARD RECIPROCAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

We propose moving beyond the current interventions to a system of reciprocal accountability—a school-centered approach focused on success for all students. An equitable, comprehensive, and reciprocal system of accountability requires all participants to take active roles, in contrast to having a system imposed by the central office or the state. It strives for intrinsic accountability in which members of the school community—teachers, principals, site council members, parents, and students—are the primary designers, with strong support from the central office and the state. Reciprocal accountability means that everyone accepts responsibility for results.

Reciprocal accountability assumes high expectations, assessment, continuous improvement, and mutually supportive relationships among all those who play a role in education, both inside and outside the system. In a reciprocal system, all participants actively work to ensure that all students experience success in school. Authority and responsibility are clearly located at the school, with strong support provided by the school district and the state.

### Some Tough Questions

Implicit in both our critique and the approach we advocate are many unanswered questions—questions that represent discussions to be had and work to be done. A few of them follow.

- 1 What is needed at all levels to close the systemwide achievement gap?
- 2 In a system of reciprocal accountability, what steps are necessary to ensure that issues of equity do not get separated from issues of excellence?
- 3 To what extent should teachers and principals be held accountable for student performance? What supports and consequences are appropriate for teachers whose classes are consistently low-performing? What role can unions play in ensuring that teachers who should no longer be teaching find other jobs?
- 4 In what ways can we hold central office and state administrators accountable for student performance? Is it possible to raise the standards of achievement for students without financial investment in opportunities to learn to high standards? Should schools be held accountable if the state and district have failed to invest in implementing standards well?
- 5 Who initiates standards in a system of reciprocal accountability? The school? The district? The state? How do we ensure that parents and community members are active participants in discussions of standards and the resources needed to implement them?
- 6 Can we avoid the “blame syndrome” for parents and communities and move to solutions that include support, respectful partnerships, and fair accountability?
- 7 Are we willing to provide the needed time, resources, and rigor to make substantive improvement in schools and school districts? How long is long enough?
- 8 What constitutes meaningful progress? For parents? Schools? Districts? How can progress over time be demonstrated? What methods should be devised to compare progress across schools when alternative forms of assessment are used?
- 9 How should political pressures for prompt action be honored? How can a school district or a school honestly report low performance and limited progress in a politically charged environment?
- 10 If schools need autonomy and authority to be accountable, what steps should precede district-led interventions? Can interventions be designed to increase autonomy?

- 11** In a system of reciprocal accountability, how do we ensure rigor and high expectations at all levels of the educational system? What happens when schools and districts disagree? When parents and educators disagree?
- 12** Will reciprocal accountability improve public confidence in public schools? Will it increase the public will to provide adequate resources and support?

## NEXT STEPS

The work on interventions is new in every city. Administrators charged with the responsibility of designing and implementing those interventions have already begun to seek ways to improve their current initiatives. Closing the gap in student performance across schools must be part of this improvement. The work required to close the gap among all students (with no exceptions) makes it essential to develop a broader policy of reciprocal accountability among schools, parents and community members, school districts, and state education departments.

There are, as yet, only a limited number of good models of strong support across system levels—ample state support for standards-based reform; district support for curriculum redesign; school-based professional development and support for multiple, shared instructional strategies that give teachers many ways to teach; school time for reflection and data-based school improvement planning that places student work at its center; leadership development for parents and community members; and a strong investment in capacity building across the system levels.

Still, practices are in place that reflect some elements of the system we advocate. Building these practices into an equitable, comprehensive, and reciprocal system of accountability requires thoughtful leaders who can integrate the elements into a strong whole. When we hold urban schools accountable for teaching all students to high standards, it is not just an academic exercise; it is an educational and civic imperative. We believe that shared accountability at all levels holds the greatest promise for school and student success.

