

Roundtable News

Challenges of School Governance

How do we learn to improve? Can we get better at getting better?



Greg Thornton, former Baltimore superintendent now with the National Center on Education & the Economy, lights up room following panel on state & mayoral takeovers by demanding educators address needs of all students.

"We don't have an education crisis, we have a poverty crisis," declared Pennsylvania Deputy Secretary of Education David Volkman at the outset of his remarks. Agreed David Berliner, Emeritus Regents Professor of Education at Arizona State University, "There's little wrong with our schools that housing and decent jobs wouldn't fix."

In the face of these challenges, educators experience "initiative fatigue," reported Anthony Bryk, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Education, he said, is a "field characterized by miracle goals and no methods."

Meanwhile, according to a panel moderated by Elizabeth Rich, Commentary Editor of *Education Week*, many districts face severe governance challenges, in which getting school boards, central offices, and bargaining

units on the same page is often an issue.

When things go sideways, state or mayoral takeovers may be appropriate, reported Gerald Kohn, former Harrisburg, PA leader and Jessica Huizenga, newly appointed "receiver" of Southbridge schools in Massachusetts. Discipline disparities contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, said Gloria Davis, superintendent of an Illinois district responsible for young adults in correctional systems. Prisons, she said, "are a profit-making business."

The news isn't all grim. Tim Mills of Bellevue Schools in Washington and Paul Ash, recently retired from Lexington schools in Massachusetts, reported on successful governance approaches. And PDK's Joshua Starr provided encouraging news on public perceptions. Still, it's no time to rest

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Joshua Starr describes PDK's 48th Annual poll of Public Perceptions of Public Schools.

on our laurels and lots of work lies ahead. This issue of Roundtable News examines these issues.

CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

It's been hard to turn anywhere recently without hearing about American schools and their problems. Presidents and members of Congress scrutinize them. Governors and legislators develop plans to improve them. Business leaders complain about them. Judges opine about them. Blue-ribbon commissions issue proclamations about them. And parents and other citizens worry about them. The energy behind school reform in recent decades is unprecedented in its depth, scope, intensity, and duration.



L to R: Elizabeth Rich leads discussion with Tom Gentzel, Andy Coons, and James Harvey

A Complex Educational Enterprise

The complexity of the K-12 enterprise is remarkable. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 50.4 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in September, enrolling in nearly 13,500 public school districts (some elementary, some high school, most K-12) overseeing 98,000 public schools. More than 70% of these districts enroll fewer than 2,500 students, with nearly half enrolling fewer than 1,000, 34% enrolling fewer than 600, and 20% enrolling fewer than 300. Top-down, one-size-fits-all policies trip over this complexity.

Challenges

A panel moderated by Elizabeth Rich, Commentary Editor of Education Week, explored the challenges of how the main local actors involved in local governance—school boards, superintendents, and union leaders—can come together to manage this complexity and improve school performance. Made up of Andy Coons, director of NEA's Center for Great Public Schools, Tom Gentzel, executive director of the National School Boards Association, and James Harvey, executive director of the

Roundtable, the discussion, under Rich's gentle prodding was polite but frank:

- Gentzel emphasized the governance and democratic benefits of locally elected school boards committed to community values, with members who devote countless hours to local matters.
- Harvey worried about single-issue candidates campaigning for board seats, a revolving door in the superintendency, and the destructiveness of school strikes.
- Coons focused on NEA's efforts to create great schools. Having led a strike as a local union leader, he described it as one of the most difficult and painful experiences of his professional career.

Major Concerns. Asked by Rich to list what keeps you awake at night, Gentzel worried about the erosion of appreciation for public schools and the need for superintendents to work with boards as policymakers. Coons noted the possibility of missing the opportunity ESSA provided of changing the status quo. He also emphasized teachers' frustration at lack of voice in the decision making process, arguing that teachers bring a special expertise to the table that needs to be valued.



Harvey noted the widespread contempt for government promoted by the right wing and the reflection of that contempt in the manner in which “school reformers” discuss schools — emphasizing costs, “the blob,” the revolving door of superintendents, contentious board-superintendent relationships and market-based ideas such as merit pay.

Hang Together or Separately

It is clear that many superintendents, school board leaders, and union officials are leading impressive efforts to improve learning. Still, the panelists agreed that the current environment for schools is often toxic. (*Cont'd p.7*)

GETTING BETTER AT GETTING BETTER

Educators, said Anthony Bryk (below, addressing Roundtable) are experiencing “initiative fatigue.” This scholar, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, spent several decades examining successive waves of school reform in Chicago, work that resulted in *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. He described education as “a field characterized by miracle

goals and no methods.”

What to do?

The need for improvement is in many ways self-evident, especially amidst rapid social and institutional change on a global scale, said Bryk. But what could Carnegie, an operating foundation, do? What would a new R&D initiative look like? Bryk’s latest book, *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*, con-

cludes that a combination of performance management (setting goals and creating targets), evidence-based approaches similar to medical trials, and communities of practice offers a promising model. And the new *Every Student Succeeds Act*, he suggested, has real strengths, since it sees local schools as central actors and encourages the use of evidence. (Cont’d p. 7)



A STATE EXAMINES FUNDING AND POVERTY

The United States does not “have an education crisis, it has a poverty crisis,” declared David W. Volkman, former superintendent of Susquehanna Township schools now serving as Executive Deputy Secretary in the Pennsylvania Department of Education. He described a situation in which the state is 47th in job growth, while the schools are desegregated, 20% of students live in “abject poverty,” and another 27% are working poor. Meanwhile a third of population has no connection with children under 18 and no connection with schools.

Research confirms Volkman’s description. Pennsylvania has long been challenged to create a functional and fair school finance formula. An adequacy and equity study in 2007 produced a new formula in 2008 that took student-poverty levels and local tax effort into effect. However, in 2011, according to a graduate paper produced by Meghan Lustig at George Washington University, Governor Tom Corbett and the rural-dominated legislature conspired to undo the needs-based formula.

Philadelphia, according to Lustig, has the highest proportion of low-income students in the ten largest cities in the United States. The Corbett formula took \$1,300 per student out of the city, while reducing per-pupil allocations in neighboring suburban districts by \$100 or less. Meanwhile, state decisions to expand charter schools created a situation in which parents who had previously paid for their children’s private education now used public funds to cover charter school costs, while saddling school districts with the fixed expenses of maintenance and utilities without the per-student income designed to cover those costs.

To address the consequences of charter expansion and the state’s revocation of the needs-based funding formula, the city of Philadelphia was forced to dismantle its education system, shutter 31 schools, lay off thousands of teachers, and cancel contracts. The press treated these developments as a consequence of district incompetence and mismanagement, but they were clearly (Cont’d p. 7)

MYTHS AND LIES THREATENING SCHOOLS



Attendees sat up and paid attention when David Berliner, Regents' Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University, opened his presentation with the following: "There's little wrong with our schools that housing and decent jobs wouldn't fix."

Berliner (left) led the Roundtable through a *tour-de-force* of data on the social conditions surrounding schools. Statistically, he said, it is quite clear that socio-economic standing is directly related to tested achievement. Three variables are especially significant: household income, single-parent status of household, and parental education. Money would be better spent improving children's lives than on school spending, he asserted.

Effects of Poverty

The effects of poverty are insidious and far-reaching, according to the data. Poor families are likely to move more often. Poverty also quadruples the likelihood of substance abuse, while increasing the risks of suicide, psychiatric disorder, and status as a violent offender by a factor of three.

Wealthy families benefit not simply from better-funded schools, said Berliner. Their children also benefit from parental spending on education-related activities. Spending on education-related activities outside school by wealthier families in the U.S. has increased from \$3,000 to \$6,500 per child in constant dollars since 1970, he said. For low-income families the comparable figure has remained static at \$800 per child over that period.

The overemphasis on testing is destructive, he said. Teacher evaluations based on tests are arbitrary. Gender, English-language proficiency, and the presence of disabilities all affect scores. Standardized tests are not instructionally sensitive and nobody has demonstrated that teaching to particular test items is valuable.

In light of all that, he thought international comparisons were largely irrelevant, and that comparison of U.S. student performance with performance in Shanghai was without merit, given differences in the two systems.

Largely ignored also in the conventional discussion, he said, is the fact that among 15-year-olds, the U.S. has the largest share of the global supply of high-performing students.

PDK'S 48TH ANNUAL POLL OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

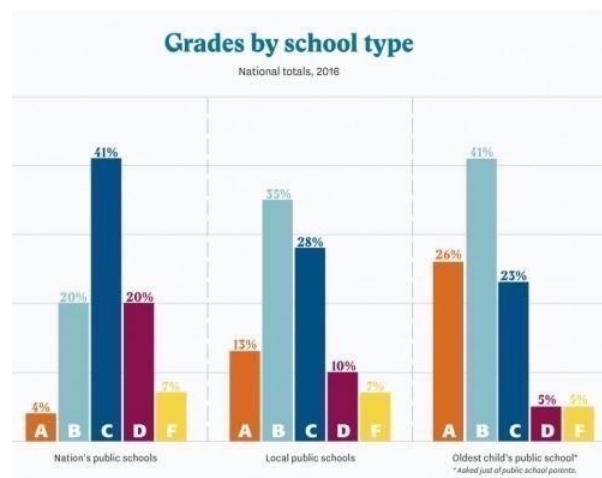
Against that backdrop, new Roundtable member Joshua Starr, CEO of PDK International, presented the findings of PDK's most recent poll on public perceptions of public schools. As always, the poll makes for fascinating reading. Among the highlights:

The closer respondents are to a public school, the more positive they are. Only 25% would give an A or B to schools as a whole, but nearly half (48%) give high grades to their local schools, while 77% grade the school attended by their oldest child as an A or B (figure right).

Respondents divide on the primary purpose of schools: 45% view the main goal as preparing students academically; 25% favor a focus on preparing students for work; and 25% emphasize preparing them to be good citizens.

The public overwhelmingly favors helping challenged schools (84%) instead of closing them (14%).

Meanwhile, three-quarters or more of respondents agreed on the importance of several school objectives: developing good work habits in students, providing factual information, enhancing critical thinking and citizenship skills, and preparing students to work well in



groups. Parents were more inclined to think schools were doing very well in these areas than other citizens, but among neither parents nor citizens did a majority give high marks to schools on these issues.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

When local schools are transparently failing students and communities, what are the alternatives? One is represented by mayoral or state takeovers, unappealing though they may be. And what to do for young people yanked from school into the unsympathetic arms of the correctional system? A panel made up of Gerald Kohn, former Harrisburg, PA superintendent, Jessica Huizenga, state receiver responsible for Southbridge schools in Massachusetts, and Gloria Davis, superintendent of a statewide district functioning within the Illinois Department of Justice, addressed these issues.

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. When Kohn took over Harrisburg schools in 2000, he inherited a completely dysfunctional district and a student population with a poverty rate of 93%, 96% of them children of color. Just 11% of students passed state assessments. More students were incarcerated than graduated; the district had a \$12 million structural deficit; patronage, nepotism, and theft were rife. Library shelves were empty; professional development was unavailable; pre-K, remedial reading and math had been abandoned; no high school report cards were issued in 2000.

Over a 10-year period, Kohn turned this around with a blizzard of initiatives: systemic supports of real budgets, union partnerships, new HR systems, and PD. New programs for pre-K, an alternative school, reading specialists, learning walks, a Sci-Tech High School, community partnerships, and an infusion of foundation funds.

Results? Graduation rates up by 171%; college admissions increased 419%; dropout and teenage pregnancy rates cut in half; a budget surplus of \$5 million. Why did this work? Said Kohn, "It worked not because of mayoral control but because the mayor protected those of us on the front lines from politicians and board members meddling with the work."

Southbridge, Massachusetts. In Southbridge, the state receiver holds the authority of both the superintendent and the board, reported Huizenga. More than 75% of students are low-income. First identified as underperforming by the state in 2004, in the last five years the district has seen 7 superintendents and 7 high school principals come and go, along with the transition of nearly four dozen administrators. A state review in 2015 concluded the school committee had overstepped its authority and involved itself in school operations (including establishing honors courses for board members' children). The state appointed Huizenga as receiver in early 2016. She is working toward collaborative goal-setting with key stakeholders, setting goals for achievement



and instruction, and aligning board goals in support of district goals. The first products? More classroom assistants and technology, along with the establishment of 5 priority areas and 60 benchmarks for performance to be met by August 2017.

School-to-prison pipeline. The prison industry is a "profit-making business," said long-time Roundtable member Gloria Davis, who retired from Decatur schools only to be lured into taking over Illinois' School District #428, a statewide program in the Department of Juvenile Justice for inmates aged 21 or younger.

"We need to reverse the trend of young people going to prison," said Davis, describing a district of five schools enrolling more than 300 young people. Across the U.S. children of color and those with disabilities are grossly over-represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. Teenage drinking or schoolyard fights can lead to suspensions and assignment to juvenile justice facilities. When Davis arrived, guards at some of these facilities decided whether classes would be offered or cancelled as disciplinary measures. With overburdened courts, young people can languish in custody for months before their cases are called.

A number of reforms in the system and aftercare are essential, said Davis. Schools can play a part. They can disrupt the pipeline by addressing the disparate impact of discipline on students of color and by replacing suspension and expulsion with restorative justice as the standard in school discipline.



MAKING IT WORK

At the other end of the spectrum, when things go well, remarkable results can be achieved. Tim Mills, superintendent in Bellevue, Washington and Paul Ash, recently retired as superintendent in Lexington, Massachusetts had encouraging stories to share.

Bellevue, Washington. Mills joined Bellevue schools in 2012 and inherited a legacy of union-management distrust from a difficult 2008 strike. He set out to turn that around. In an echo of Andy Coons' opening remarks, he said: "Employee voice matters." A positive culture is important for everyone in the district.

Adopting an approach grounded in listening, which he had employed successfully in other districts, Mills encouraged the sharing of "stories" in initial bargaining talks, in part as an effort to identify the issues behind



the stories. When staff engage in financial conversations, they have a better understanding of what's driving the conversation. Then you can move from issues to solutions, he said.

The key, Mills emphasized, is the need to create a "culture of collaboration," which "starts with trust and relationships." It is not simply a feel-good strategy. Evaluation, commitment, and implementation are required. Training for district facilitators, building-level leaders, and district committee is essential.

I've led my members through years of anger and strike. Building trust and problem solving around issues is not always a simple process, but it's one I am committed to as a union leader. I have no interest in ever moving back to positional arguing.

But success invites broad-based trust, employee commitment to solutions, bargaining that is collaborative, not confrontational (with contract language affirming collaboration as the key approach), and a systemic approach for identifying key issues and developing solutions.

Lexington, Massachusetts. A Roundtable study mission to England in 2012 transformed the thinking of Paul Ash, Lexington superintendent.

At Bonner Primary, set amidst Tower Hamlets' housing estates in the poorest community in the country, where families crowded into tenements 12 to a room, he found a principal who had created a school that consistently outperformed all London schools and all schools in England on tested achievement in reading, writing, and math. With a diverse, low-income population.



Ash took several lessons from this and from his other research. Leadership is critical. Unflinching analysis of performance is step one. Excellent teaching, rigorous appraisal, forward planning, a rich and robust curriculum, and strong community links are all required.

The whole system needs to change, insisted Ash, not just bits and pieces of it here and there. He laid out 15 "high-leverage strategies" around curriculum, data, achievement task forces, insisting on a standards-based grading system, challenging a culture of low expectations, a clear mission and goals, powerful intervention strategies along with powerful adult learning opportunities, and expanded community engagement opportunities.

The results have been dramatic. A high-income district, Lexington in 2006 had a yawning achievement gap in English and math. By 2014, average SAT results for Black students had increased at nearly six times the rate of increase for all students. Grade 10 proficiency levels in math and language arts for Black students led the state. Perhaps most gratifying: A recent Stanford University study indicated that Lexington's success in closing the achievement gap by Grade 10 flew in the face of a widespread phenomenon: achievement gaps almost invariably widen as districts become wealthier.

On expectations, concluded Ash, he used to accept a lot of excuses. "I've become much more hard-nosed. With the right supports, all kids are capable of achieving at very high levels."

CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL GOVERNANCE (CONT'D)

Critics aren't going away. Pressures for choice and privatization are here to stay. Hectoring, bullying, and derision of professional judgment continue unabated.

In this environment, tension and conflict between competing centers

of influence in schools plays into critics' hands. In an echo chamber of public criticism, positive change receives little attention.

In that spirit, Elizabeth Rich asked that something beyond talk come out of the conversation: She asked

the panel members to submit a joint article on governance to *Education Week*, which she committed to publishing. More anon, as the literature majors say.

GETTING BETTER AT GETTING BETTER (CONT'D)

Evaluations of school interventions, even positive results, can lead people astray, Bryk noted, pointing to positive national results for the Reading Recovery program. The positive average concealed enormous variation in outcomes by district, with some districts experiencing wildly successful results and others failing quite miserably.

We can "learn our way" into improvement, suggested Bryk, by organizing as networks. He called for imagining education as a place where systematic learning is happening every day, supported by an

immense networked improvement strategy. Instead of "implementing fast" and "learning slow," we should aim to "learn fast" and "implement well," in part by repetitive and rapid cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA). He offered six principles:

1. Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.
2. Variation in performance is the core problem to address.
3. See the system that produces the current outcomes and see how local conditions shape work.

4. We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure.

5. Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry through rapid cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA).

6. Accelerate improvements through networked communities because we can accomplish more together than alone.

Bryk invited members of the Roundtable interested in pursuing these ideas to join the Foundation's annual meeting in San Francisco in March.

A STATE EXAMINES FUNDING AND POVERTY (CONT'D)

at least in part, consequences of brutal state decisions.

The Education Law Project awarded a grade of "D" to the state for what the Project described as a regressive funding system in which districts with high concentrations of poverty actually received less money per student than wealthier districts. In July of this year, following an extended stalemate with the legislature, a new governor, Tom Wolf announced an agreement on a 2016-17 budget that promised new monies for schools and a more equitable formula. Volkman, however, provided an insight into the new funding formula that surprised Roundtable members: the formula applies only to new monies; it "grandfathers" in all existing funds. Equitable funding for Pennsylvania schools awaits mid-century.

Despite these challenges, under the leadership of Pedro Rivera, former Lancaster, PA superintendent now serving as Governor Wolf's Secretary of Education, the Keystone State has embarked on an ambitious school improvement effort that includes several factors. Rivera and Volkman are determined to take poverty and its impact on learning into account and they greatly encourage community-based schools that integrate health, nutrition and other services around schools. "By 2025,



David Volkman addresses Roundtable

60% of our workforce will require postsecondary training for jobs that don't exist today," said Volkman. The state is rethinking college vs. non-college track and has created a Pennsylvania's Superintendent's Academy that works with more than 80 superintendents from high-poverty districts to promote deep inquiry, learn from each other, and share best practice.

HERE AND THERE

Superintendents Speak

Offered the opportunity to comment on these issues, Roundtable members were not shy. Among the comments:

Governance challenges:

Boards can be disruptive; ability to work with board a key
Need to include impact of legislators in discussion
Turnover among boards and superintendents a challenge

Getting Better at Getting Better

Bandwidth and capacity to work on these issues limited
Need customized solutions
What works in one district might not work elsewhere
How do we find funding for such an effort?

Advice for States

Understand that districts are not all the same
Give us the flexibility promised in ESSA
27 years is too long for Pennsylvania to wait for equity
Student absenteeism good ESSA measure

Mayoral and State Takeovers

Dependent on right mayor and superintendent
Measure success by sustainability after receivership ends

School-to-Prison Pipeline

Schools getting rid of problems instead of dealing with them
Replace culture of punishment with restorative justice
Need wrap-around services that respond to students' needs
and deal with poverty & discrimination

Superintendent's Fieldbook

The Superintendent's Fieldbook, a best-seller for Corwin Press was written and edited by four founding members of the Roundtable and re-issued in a 2nd edition in 2013. Reflections from Roundtable members make a significant contribution to the text, which is widely used in superintendent preparation programs. Available at Corwin Press: <http://www.corwin.com/books/Book237433>

Calendar & Contact

April 8 - 17, 2017

Study Mission to Cuba

July 2017 (Dates TBD)

Summer Meeting, San Francisco area

Topic: The Achievement Gap

October 2017 (Dates TBD)

Fall Meeting, Washington, DC

Topic: Work of the Future

The Roundtable:

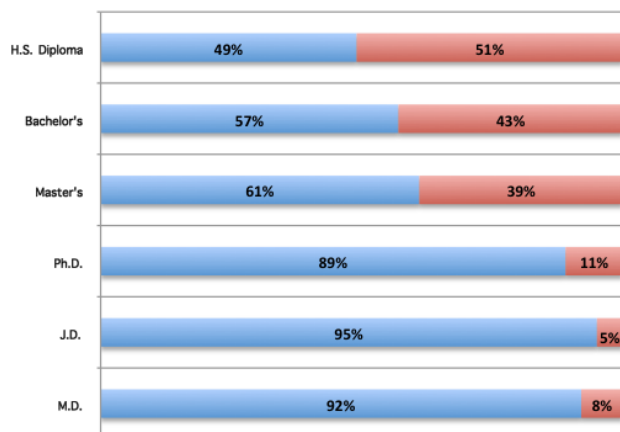
National Superintendents
Roundtable
9425 35th Avenue, NE, Suite E
Seattle, WA 98115
206-526-5336

Note: PowerPoint presentations from meeting speakers available on request

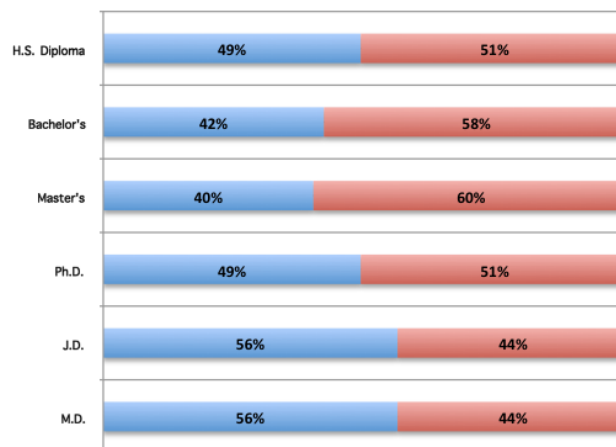
Share of Educational Credentials by Gender, 1970 & 2012

■ Men ■ Women

1970



2012



Source: National Center for Education Statistics & National Science Foundation, 2015