



# **Promising Practices to Improve Schools and Communities:**

## **A Survey of Highly Collaborative and Comprehensive Education Reform Efforts**

Executive Summary

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### **Executive Summary**

The notion that children cannot achieve academic excellence without good health, a supportive social circle, and a safe environment seems common sense to families and educational policy makers alike. Yet, for many years, society has portioned out the care of children to different stakeholders. Schools were responsible for educating, doctors and nurses for promoting health, parents and extended families for providing nurture, and a variety of government agencies for regulating and improving the physical environment.

On a parallel course, governments have portioned out to different agencies responsibility for different tasks: schools educate, social services help the needy, urban planning develops good housing, and so on. Quite often, the right hand does not know what the left hand was doing, so that agencies might be working at cross-purposes, for example, a school board closing schools in an area targeted for redevelopment. In addition, common efforts at the city, county, state, and federal level might lack coordination.

In recent years, there have been signs of a more holistic approach across all areas. Understanding that the “whole child” must be educated, schools have been extending their mission to a range of supportive services. Often, they have collaborated with other government and community agencies to accomplish this. At the same time, government units have been looking more and more toward collaboration across governmental boundaries.

*Highly collaborative and comprehensive education reform* is a term attached to efforts grounded in this thinking. Such reform efforts use partnerships to address a broad array

of student needs with the goal of ensuring academic, social, and emotional success for students. The underlying assumption is that if “non-school” factors such as housing and health care contribute to children’s learning outcomes, they must be included in any meaningful effort to improve schools.

This is not brand new territory. The Coalition for Community Schools has become a hub of resources and information on the community schools movement, which creates partnerships between the school and other community resources. In such schools, academic goals are integrated with family support, health and social services, and youth and community development. Schools are resources not only for students and their parents but for anyone in the community, and the doors are open evenings and weekends as well as school days. Community-based organizations or public institutions are often involved in the provision of services.

Another strategy is Beacon Centers. Started in New York several decades ago, Beacons are school based community centers that offer resources and support to students and families. Under such programs, school buildings are generally available for student and community use after school, on weekends, and during the summer. The goal of the program is to offer integrated services and activities for positive youth development and to develop a sense of community linked to the school and home. Various community based organizations and agencies use school facilities to offer educational services, job training, parenting workshops, and counseling to families in need of such services.

Most recently, statewide education reform efforts have focused on the P-16 framework, compact, initiative, or council, where the “P” stands for preschool and the “16” stands for completion of college. These groups strive to be student-focused, comprehensive, integrated systems that form a continuum of all education levels by linking programs and aligning curricula and education policies. Some 30 states now have P-16s in various forms.

In this context, the Center for Cities & Schools (CC&S), with support from the Fannie Mae Foundation, set out in the summer of 2006 to take a preliminary look at American models of highly collaborative and comprehensive education reforms as an answer to America’s educational achievement struggles and gaps. While the community schools, Beacon Center, and P-16 programs are widespread, we knew that other efforts had evolved idiosyncratically with largely the same goals. Using a literature review and interviews with leaders in education and government, we were able to identify a broad spectrum of approaches to addressing the complex needs of America’s youngsters and the communities that they call home.

CC&S conducted dozens of interviews with city governments, school districts, foundations, and national, regional, and local non-profits and community-based organizations to provide a concise summary of innovative efforts that draw on resources from many stakeholders to achieve optimal outcomes for students and to put education in the center of a broader program of community change, particularly regarding low-income communities and their schools. The following report represents the result of this work.

## Projects Reviewed

While some of the efforts described here are connected to one degree or another with the community schools movement, beacon centers, or the P-16 framework, nearly all have adapted the model to suit the context and needs of their own communities. One or two projects are completed or near completion, while another handful are just getting under way. These efforts include community initiatives and redevelopment plans, non-profit organizations, and formal inter-governmental agency collaborations.

By showing a variety of strategies, a range of large and small communities, and different stages of implementation, our goal was to offer a broad view of what's happening across the nation in the arena of highly collaborative and comprehensive education reform. Similarly, we report on efforts rooted in different levels of government: neighborhood, city, county, and state. Our hope is to provide a range of potential stakeholders—from policymakers and foundations to school and community leaders—an overview of what's going on in this crucial area.

This section provides short summaries of the programs described at greater length in the complete report. Tables 1, 2, and 3 summarize key indicators in the areas of Basic Characteristics, Funding, and Educational Agenda.

### *Neighborhood*

**Harlem Children's Zone, Inc.** [New York, New York]. A champion of a joint neighborhood revitalization and educational reform, this pioneering, non-profit, community-based organization works to enhance the quality of life for children and families in Harlem with the goal of keeping families together and children out of foster care. One the best-documented efforts in terms of formal evaluations and the media, HCZ has attracted particular attention for focusing efforts on a 60-block zone in Harlem. Besides its broader services, HCZ offers education at all levels from preschool to adult, and it has founded two public charter schools.

**The San Diego Model School Development Agency** [California]. A collaboration between the city and the school district operates under a joint powers agreement<sup>1</sup> with the goal of designing and building a new school at the center of an urban village. While the project is still in the planning stages, the process itself has brought together a variety of city, school, and community stakeholders, with benefits in terms of understanding each other's needs.

**The Vashon Education Compact** [St. Louis, Missouri]. This non-profit organization was a spinoff of a more comprehensive neighborhood redevelopment initiative that was supported by a foundation and implemented in large part by developers. The initiative

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<sup>1</sup> A joint powers agreement is defined as an agreement or contract between a city, a county and/or a special district in which the city or county agrees to perform services, cooperate with, or lend its powers to, the special district.

was sparked by the need to renovate a high school in a rundown neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri, and the Compact focused on schools. Over its five-year life span, the Compact completed the high school project and generated significant improvements at six of the ten schools in its target area.

### *City*

**The Berkeley Alliance** [California]. A non-profit organization, the Alliance brings together representatives of the University of California at Berkeley, the mayor's office, the school district, and the broader community to harness resources and expertise to better the community. The Alliance's focus is on not creating programs but building partnerships that will lead to positive outcomes for children and youth.

**The Emeryville Center of Community Life** [California]. The school district, the city, community members, and local businesses are working together to craft a redevelopment plan with education at its center. The Emeryville project has served to convene stakeholders and build consensus for the new center across the district and various city agencies. It has also facilitated increased participation from local businesses in strategies to improve education in the short term, with everything from fund raising to student mentoring.

**Lincoln Community Learning Centers** [Nebraska]. This community initiative provides safe, supervised before- and after school programs, weekend and summer enrichment programs, and many other supportive services for citizens of all ages at 19 public schools in Lincoln, Nebraska. Based on the community schools philosophy, the Community Learning Centers are school-based resources for a variety of services that can foster improved student learning and development, strong families, and healthier neighborhoods.

### *County*

**The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board.** A state-authorized intergovernmental organization that joins the school district with other community leaders, the board promotes the healthy, comprehensive development of Minneapolis / Hennepin County youth through collaborative action and policy alignment guided by a well-articulated children and youth agenda. It operates a School Readiness program but has recently decided to return to its earlier orientation as a policy-making body.

**The Stark Education Partnership** [Ohio]. This non-profit, independent, intermediary organization mobilizes private sector resources to improve 17 school districts and their schools and to foster comprehensive education reform in Stark County, Ohio. It helps districts apply for grants and supports a wide-range of in-school and after school programs with the result of significant gains in student achievement.

**SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) Service System** [Oregon]. A multi-jurisdictional collaborative effort of public and private entities in and around Portland Oregon, SUN works with schools and their communities to define and implement services. SUN, which is administered by the Multnomah County Department of School and Community Partnerships, uses schools as a base to deliver a wide range of social and health services to students and their parents.

## *State*

**Hawaii's Comprehensive Student Support System.** An umbrella for ensuring a continuum of supports and services that ensure the academic, social, emotional, and physical environments necessary for all students to learn, the system has a special focus on those with special needs. Housed in the Student Support Services Branch of Hawaii's Department of Education, the system's sole staff member coordinates positive behavior support systems, freshmen academies, and junior kindergartens in the state's schools.

**Indiana's Education Roundtable** – The roundtable is a comprehensive P-16 effort in the form of a 30-person roundtable appointed and co-chaired by the Governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction. Primarily a policy-recommending body, especially in the area of standards and benchmarks, the board makes proposals which have often been implemented, with apparently positive results on college attendance rates.

## **Findings**

With the goal of providing information that would be useful in building new models, we used a theoretical framework to explain the history of each effort and its unique aspects: Inspiration, Leadership and Stakeholders, Infrastructure, Funding, Scope of Work, Accomplishments, and Challenges. Using such a framework makes it possible to compare and contrast different programs. More important, perhaps, it provides some blueprints that may be useful for others seeking to implement highly collaborative and comprehensive education reform in their own schools.

This section summarizes some of the basic findings in each of these subject areas.

### *Inspiration*

In the early phases of organizational development, *risk-taking* and experimentation are common. Several founders were charismatic individuals with a strong *sense of mission*. Most efforts have a strong understanding of low-income families and of the *needs of students and their communities*.

## *Leadership and Stakeholders*

**Strong organizational leadership**, with careful provision for the succession of leaders and continuity of services, is an important marker of success. Efforts that reach out to **include elected political leaders** can draw on the resources that government offers, and outreach to include **community and business leaders** has distinct advantages in creating buy-in for the project.

## *Infrastructure*

Creating an **enabling environment** that fosters collaboration and innovation helps to ensure favorable conditions for change. Well-defined organizational charts and long-term governance structures ensure accountability. Because many of these efforts involve multiple leaders and agencies, creating a **web of communication and trust** is crucial to success.

## *Funding*

**Being creative with funding** and using existing structures and hidden mechanisms can ensure fiscal efficiency and reduce unnecessary spending. **Stable funding** is assured by achieving a revenue mix that can ensure sustainability. Foundations and other private sector funding often plays a key role, and it avoids having projects depend on inconsistent public dollars.

## *Scope of Work*

The agenda of the different efforts ranges from planning and policy making—most common at the state level and in new projects—to the actual provision of services and operation of educational programs. Regardless of their specific mission, all groups feature **shared power and shared responsibility**, and the trust that collaboration builds is an important, if not always intended outcome. All partners must agree on and work to sustain a **well-defined, common vision**. Clear objectives and roles for each partner facilitate success.

## *Accomplishments*

While the outcomes vary from standard setting to actual brick and mortar buildings, common threads underlying their success include **adaptability** to ongoing demographic, economic, and political change. **Constant evaluations** from both internal and external sources, as well as a willingness to adapt to evaluation outcomes are significant. Whether the goals are academic improvement, decreased crime, or an increased level of dialogue between policymakers and community members, evaluations should show progress. Table 4 lists the chief accomplishments of each of the efforts reviewed here.

## Challenges

To clear hurdles to its inception and sustained success, a learning organization should strive for *continuous improvement* and solicit and incorporate suggestions from internal and external sources, *learning from its own mistakes* and successes as well as those of other organizations. Table 5 lists the chief challenges experienced by each of the efforts reviewed in this report.

## Recommendations

The mission of the Center for Cities & Schools is to promote high quality education as an essential component of urban and metropolitan vitality. It does so through interdisciplinary research, professional education, and collaborative practice. This report has been produced in hopes that identifying these ground-breaking models will help to inform future efforts and will bring to the fore the importance of the continued study and development of innovative collaborative education reform practice as a means for systems change. Some recommendations follow:

**Diversify funding streams** to create a balanced revenue mix by approaching potential partners with well-thought out, innovative funding mechanisms.

**Establish leadership boards and councils** as well as an administrative team to share the burden of responsibility with a founder or executive.

**Include a wide range of stakeholders, including community members and parents** to ensure goals are aligned with needs and **political stakeholders** of varying political views.

**Institutionalize interagency structures** that embrace educational, governmental, and community stakeholders, providing liaisons, and **formalize all structures** that circumvent or redefine traditional barriers, perhaps by 501(c) 3 status.

**Document work and perform assessments and evaluations** to provide evidence of outcomes that will facilitate greater funding opportunities.