

Promoting a Management Revolution in Public Education

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How often has it been said that public education in the United States should be run more like a business? This exhortation urges American public schools to apply the same management, leadership and organizational approaches to public education that have been used to create the iconic state of global business. The idea is simple and seductive. The problem is that while public school districts have a myriad of managerial, leadership and organizational concerns, they are not businesses. In reality, their differences are greater than their similarities. The way they acquire capital, their mandate to serve all students (customers) regardless of capabilities or desires, and their accountability to a multiplicity of public and private stakeholders, who often have conflicting interests, are but a few examples. School districts today face unique challenges that make them more difficult to lead and manage than virtually any other enterprise in our country.

Some attribute the problem with public education to a lack of resources, but more money alone does not seem to provide a solution. This year spending on K-12 education by federal, state, and local governments will reach approximately \$450 billion. Although per pupil spending has more than doubled in real dollars over the last 30 years, student achievement has remained stagnant. U.S. students look mediocre, or worse, in comparison to students in other industrialized countries, ranking 16th out of 20 in the number of students who complete high school. Interestingly, in the 4th grade, U.S. students are near the top among these countries in math and science, but finish high school near the bottom. In a recent speech to a summit of American governors, Bill Gates

sounded an alarm, “Training the work force of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today’s computers on a 50-year-old mainframe.”

Just as importantly, public education is doing little to ameliorate a social justice issue that has the potential to undermine our democracy. Even with a dramatic increase in targeted spending to close the performance gap between poor and minority students and their middle class and white counterparts, the gap persists, and in some inner cities it has worsened. By age nine, African American and Latino students are on average three grade levels behind, and students from low income communities are seven times less likely to graduate from college than those from wealthier areas.

The good news is that the pressure to improve is mounting and public education in the U.S. is facing an historic watershed. School districts are increasingly being held accountable for the academic performance of their students; the political, social, and economic pressure behind the accountability movement is relentless, unprecedented in its duration and intensity. Virtually every state (supported and encouraged by American industry in the late 1990’s) has passed some form of performance-based accountability—setting standards for the content to be taught in classrooms, introducing ambitious and comprehensive state-wide testing, setting targets for the improvement of student performance and putting in place rewards and sanctions for school performance. Accountability was, in its origins, a state reform movement, but one of national scope.

In 2001, performance-based accountability became the centerpiece of the Bush Administration’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. In effect, NCLB took the main themes of state accountability policies, put them into a single legal framework, and connected them to the long-standing Title 1 law, the nation’s largest aid program for

elementary and secondary education. What NCLB does is to set clear parameters on the design of state accountability systems thereby creating, in effect, a state-administered national accountability system for American education. NCLB sets ambitious targets for school performance, and introduces serious sanctions for failure to meet these targets. [Consider sidebar on NCLB] In reaction to poor academic performance some districts are closing public schools or converting them to charters; and despite contract restrictions, principals and teachers are beginning to face sanctions or dismissal.

But, this new era of accountability presupposes that district and school level administrators are capable of monitoring the performance of their organizations and making managerial decisions about resources, responsibilities, and structures that are connected to performance. Most administrators have nothing in their background to prepare them for this task. Accountability presupposes that boards and senior administrators are capable of formulating coherent strategies for achieving improvements in performance. Neither board members nor senior administrators are prepared for this task. And most importantly, accountability presupposes performance will improve by continuously investing in professional development. Few, if any, school districts have a coherent human resource investment strategy, or even know what it means to have one.

Despite these challenges and the outpouring of dollars, the American public education system has remained relatively unchanged in its basic configuration since the late 19th century. For the most part, locally elected school boards are responsible for the governance of a district. School administrators, at the district and school levels, are responsible for day-to-day management. Teachers in classrooms deliver the instruction that creates the opportunity for student learning. It is an article of faith that these

relationships have traditionally been “loosely coupled.” That is, boards are supposed to grant administrators the discretion and control to manage; administrators operate at the organizational level, with a minimum of direct control over teachers; teachers still operate within classrooms with relative autonomy about what to teach, how, and with what effect. Management, in this loosely-coupled system, insofar as it exists at all, primarily concerns itself with structural, logistical, and operational issues—making the buses run on time, getting the food delivered, getting textbooks into classrooms, building or remodeling schools—rather than strategic issues having to do with the overall performance of the organization.

Why hasn't the quality of management and leadership risen to meet the challenges in public education? It has become clear that even as pressure for performance-based accountability increases, the development of managerial capacity in public school systems does not occur as a “natural” response. To be sure, some school districts have begun to develop the systems and capacities necessary to respond, but for the most part they are without the intellectual resources that business managers take for granted. Private entrepreneurs have tried to fill this gap, but the supply of training and consulting doesn't begin to meet the level of need. A contributing factor is that there is no body of management knowledge specific to this sector. When practitioners, many of whom are hungry to learn how to lead their districts to high performance, try to apply management practices from business, the environment is so different that it is almost impossible for them to translate the ideas into practice and they rapidly become discouraged.

A body of education management knowledge does not exist because there has been no logical constituency to develop it. Contrast this to the world of business, where

for decades, business schools, consultants and thinkers have been richly rewarded for the latest theory on how a company can achieve high performance. Not so in the world of education. Schools of education tend to focus on pedagogy and policy and only to some limited degree on creating specialized management and leadership knowledge. Regrettably, the result is that traditional educational administration programs, which still certify most of the practitioners in the field, have been slow to respond to new demands. A recent report authored by Arthur Levine, President of Columbia Teacher's College, examined these programs in 25 schools of education to determine "their capacity to educate principals and superintendents in the skills and knowledge necessary to lead today's schools...This study found the overall quality of educational administration programs in the United States to be poor. The majority of the programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities."

The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), a joint project of Harvard Business School, the Harvard Graduate School of Education and nine urban school districts launched in 2004 is explicitly designed to respond to this crisis of competence and performance by developing a knowledge base for the strategic management of public education. These nine districts (with over 1 million students), like most large urban districts, have the most serious managerial issues, such as cumbersome structures and vague attenuated connections between central administrators, school administrators, and teachers. The PELP approach is to adapt and integrate the best management and leadership concepts from business, nonprofits and education to the unique environment of public schools. When the existing management knowledge cannot be adapted, new knowledge is created. But, while school district performance can benefit from improved

management and leadership, it is not enough. PELP's fundamental principle is that all three elements--pedagogy, policy and management--must meet high standards of quality and must be integrated into a coherent strategy to achieve high performance.

This integration of key elements is no easy task. Even for businesses, where there is widely held agreement about what success looks like and the market exerts powerful forces on managers to attain organizational alignment around a coherent strategy, it is a difficult objective to achieve. Imagine how much more difficult it is in the public education sector where the accountability movement has only recently brought some agreement about the primary purpose of public education. An administrator of a large urban Texas district recently commented how pleased she was that because of the state's high-profile accountability system, her "district now has a focus on teaching and learning." Even with heightened accountability, agreement on how to achieve or measure success is elusive. Earlier this year, San Diego bought out its superintendent's contract 12 months early, despite the fact that "the number of schools performing well on California's state academic performance rose to 60% while the number of schools with unsatisfactory performance fell from 37 percent to 9 percent. In addition San Diego was only one of two California districts to meet AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) for two consecutive years under No Child Left Behind." Few would dispute the difficulty of developing, much less implementing a coherent strategy if an organization is not sure of what business it is in and the outcomes it is trying to produce. Adding to this ambiguity are the internal and external forces, which, rather than pushing for alignment, almost exclusively conspire to drive the elements of a school district out of alignment.

For starters, because public schools are the all-purpose carriers of America's social agendas, the political environment tends to be crowded with contending policymakers and interest groups, each with its own battery of "solutions" to the problems of school performance. School districts have come to reflect the accumulated programs and projects of generations of these reformers, with organization charts dotted with offices and programs that represent dozens of federal, state, and local initiatives, each in its own bureaucratic bailiwick, each with its own budget, each with its own accountability requirements, and, most importantly, each with its own local, state, and federal political constituency. This condition is often exacerbated by the outside funding sources--corporations, foundations and individuals--that collectively gave over a billion dollars last year for public education, often to support the reform efforts they favored, even if they were incompatible with a district's agenda.

Deep improvement in quality and performance takes a long time to accomplish in any organization. Yet, a 2003 study found that superintendents in 64 of the largest urban districts had been in office for an average of 2 3/4 years, with 54% in office between one and five years. There has been no comprehensive study of the causes for the relatively short stay of superintendents, although the operating environment certainly contributes to this turnover. When school boards hire the next superintendent, it is rarely to continue and deepen a predecessor's approach, but rather to introduce the newest set of reform ideas and the next strategy for change. Not surprisingly, this churn contributes to a leadership team's focusing on the short-term, which results in a lack of clarity about the strategic direction of a district. During our interviews we hardly found a senior manager, much less a principal or teacher, who could articulate her district's strategy for improved

student performance. This search for a quick fix promotes a vibrant industry for education reform theories but little disciplined and systematic focus on what it takes to execute well on any given approach. The cycle repeats itself with only the occasional superintendent staying in office long enough to focus on, and be held accountable for, implementing a strategy.

Another force working against alignment is that most districts must contend with strong teachers' and principals' unions, and restrictive work rules that are rarely linked to performance outcomes. Fragmented and parochial school boards can also wreak havoc on a district. Frequently, a small percentage of eligible voters elect individuals who represent narrow constituencies, each with a strongly held point of view that may differ from the district's current approach to reform. The result is a governing board that has a cross current of competing demands and incompatible perspectives on how a district should be organized and managed. It is not uncommon to hear from superintendents that their school boards are a source of almost constant strife.

Finally, alignment is so difficult in public education because of the way the public views education. Education is considered a social good and all citizens have a claim on receiving a quality education. This belief has significant consequences for public school leaders that make their managerial task more difficult than that of almost any other type of leadership role. Politicians face similar dynamics, but if they understand their core constituency and make decisions that keep them happy, they will likely stay in office a long time, even if their trade-offs are unpopular in some quarters. Corporate leaders often must decide to shift internal resources around to create greater economic value, but they usually are able to make these organizational trade-offs out of the public eye. If their

decisions lead to increased profitability, their investors are happy. Public school leaders on the other hand are open to scrutiny from all political constituencies, and make their organizational trade-offs in the open because of the public nature of both their revenue sources and their budget approval processes. For example, when leaders decide to reallocate resources from high performing schools to lower performing schools to drive an improvement strategy, parents of children in the high performing schools often perceive a lack of equity. These parents feel they have an equal claim to resources regardless of the soundness of the management decision to focus additional resources to underperforming schools to raise student achievement. Their voices are often so important to district leaders that rational management decisions are scrapped in favor of compelling political considerations.

In light of these impediments to high performance, many in this country bemoan that little can be done to significantly improve American education short of completely dismembering the entire system. This kind of reform is unlikely to happen. Experiments with charter schools and vouchers (which are directed at changing the system in fundamental ways by creating market forces such as customer choice and competition) have to date operated on a relatively small scale. Even if these experiments prove effective, it will take years to first appraise their impact and then get them to scale. While many agree that it is beneficial for public schools to test bold systemic innovations, today's students are receiving an inadequate education.

Something can be done. Our research reveals a hopeful phenomenon—one quite familiar to businesses. Districts that unrelentingly focus on their core business of student performance, create and implement coherent strategies around this core, and array all the

elements of the district to drive and support improved classroom instruction, out-perform their peer districts with comparable constraints.

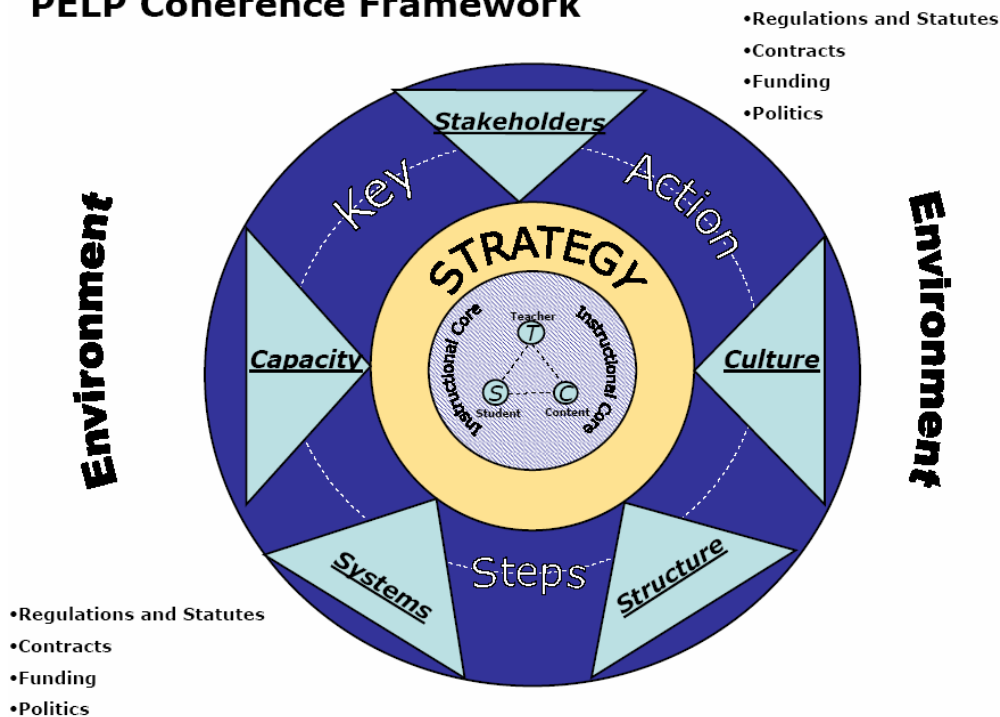
The focus on driving high-performance from the district level is a relatively recent phenomenon. Reform efforts of the last three decades have primarily targeted classrooms and schools. Without question, the most difficult and vital work in a district happens in classrooms through the relationships between teachers and students, and in schools through professional relationships among teachers. These relationships are important determinants in how effectively students learn. However, even though high-performing classrooms and schools exist in isolation or in small pockets in virtually every district, no large urban district has cracked the code about how to spread this success across its system.

We work with a number of district leaders who see the connection between better management and better educational outcomes as an important element in scaling excellence. When we asked them about their management challenges, they identified a number of common organizational difficulties, such as human resource management, resource allocation, and performance management. However, most view these as distinct issues to be solved independently, rather than seeing their organizations as integrated systems in which these are all interdependent parts of a whole, directly linked to the work of teachers in classrooms. Through PELP, we are working with district leaders on two fronts. First, we are helping them create a picture of what their organizations would look like if the parts fit together; and second, we are creating a body of knowledge about how to make that picture a reality by addressing their integrated managerial challenges. Together these two efforts provide a basis for achieving high performance.

In order to create the picture, we developed the PELP Coherence Framework (PCF). We studied a number of districts that are producing gains for all students, and they share a common characteristic – they are making an effort to organize their activities more coherently. However, they do not have an effective way of thinking about or describing their efforts. The PCF has roots in organizational alignment frameworks developed for business, but incorporates what we have learned in studying 15 large districts, and is therefore relevant to the unique managerial challenges leaders of urban systems face. The primary function of the PCF is to identify the organizational elements critical to high-performance, and to pose a series of questions, rather than answers, about each in order to bring them into coherence with the strategy and each other. [Consider sidebar with questions for each element.] The key elements are: the instructional core; strategy; stakeholders; culture; structure; systems; capacity; and the environment.

Figure 1:

PELP Coherence Framework



Developed for the Public Education Leadership Project by Stacey Childress, Richard Elmore, Allen Grossman, and Modupe Akinola, Adapted from Tushman and O'Reilly 2002

Of the 15 districts we studied, some have been attempting to achieve coherence for a number of years. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) is one of them, and we will use some of their efforts to illuminate the ideas in the PCF throughout the remainder of this article. As a first step, districts must develop a **strategy** to address their specific performance challenges. In business, strategy is usually a response to conditions that exist “out there” – forces like competition and demand drive innovation and performance inside the company. In public education, the fundamental challenges and the primary customer are “in here” – students and their performance challenges are at the heart of the enterprise rather than an external force to be dealt with. In other words, in public school districts, strategy works from the inside-out, rather than outside-in.

The classroom is at the center of a public school district, and the activities that take place there are what we call the **instructional core**. By this we mean the relationship between teachers and students as they interact with content. Teaching and learning takes place through this relationship. Strategy is the coherent set of actions that the entire organization commits to in order to improve this relationship dramatically and rapidly. Most other organizational decisions, resources, and activities should be directed toward the district’s strategy to make the core more powerful. As we discussed earlier, formidable dynamics constantly pull attention away from the instructional core. However, just as in business, strategy in public school districts helps people choose what to do, and just as importantly, what *not* to do. By focusing on executing its strategy, the district can put its scarce resources to use more effectively to improve teaching and learning across all classrooms.

Even though they operate in an environment that exhibits all the challenges we described earlier in this article, SFUSD has progressed rapidly in recent years and was the top performing urban school district in California in both 2004 and 2005. SFUSD was also recently named one of the top five urban school districts in the United States by a major national foundation, which bases its assessment on the progress districts make in raising overall performance while demonstrating accelerated gains for low-income and minority students. When Superintendent Arlene Ackerman arrived in 2000, the story was quite different. A community task force, convened by a federal judge, had just completed a deep analysis of student performance in the district, and found that overall performance was stagnant and low-income and minority students were falling further behind.

By examining ten years of performance data and school characteristics, the task force discovered that schools in neighborhoods that enrolled a majority of Latino and African-American students were using a “dumbed-down” version of the district-wide curriculum in a variety of subjects, including reading and math. Teachers in these schools also demonstrated behaviors that signaled lowered expectations for Latinos and African-Americans. These schools spent less money per student than schools in other neighborhoods, primarily because the adults in them were less adept at “working the system” to convince the central office to allocate people and dollars in ways that would help address their specific performance challenges. Ackerman and her team developed a five-year plan dubbed “Excellence for All” to increase the performance of all students and accelerate the gains of African American and Latino students, or to “raise the bar AND close the gap” as they put it. They aimed to achieve this by raising the expectations, responsibility, and accountability of adults throughout the system.

For a school district, the development of an effective strategy starts with a clear definition of the performance problem, and a set of beliefs and hypotheses about which actions will produce improved results. In the common language of the education sector, this set of ideas makes up a district's "theory of action". Ackerman began by articulating a set of core beliefs to drive the development of SFUSD's strategy: children come first; parents are partners with the district; victory is in the classroom; leadership and accountability are keys to success; and, it takes the entire community to ensure the success of all students. These beliefs underpin a theory of action that proposes that adults closest to the students (principals, teachers, and parents) have the best motivation and information to make effective decisions about how to improve teaching and learning in their schools. Rather than requiring a cookie-cutter approach to educating kids, the theory promotes adaptation and innovation in classrooms.

Ackerman and her team developed a strategy to put their theory into action that can be paraphrased as follows: *We will place instructional decisions and the resources to support them in the hands of school communities, and hold everyone in the system accountable for results. Because our lowest performing schools need additional capacity and support, we will invest extra resources in and provided closer oversight to those units.* SFUSD took a number of steps to bring their organization into coherence with this strategy, and made multiple changes in each element – culture, structure, systems, capacity, stakeholders, and environment. This is hard, complicated work. For simplicity's sake, the next section gives an example of one change in each category, but it's important to remember that the illustrations only scratch the surface of the work any urban district must do to achieve coherence.

Empowering school communities as the locus of change and improvement in SFUSD provided a focal point for a series of decisions about culture, systems, structure, capacity, stakeholders and the environment. For starters, the **culture** at headquarters reflected norms and behaviors consistent with a command and control function because the central office had long been the arbiter of resources and instructional decisions. The culture at schools was one of “requesters” of resources and “receivers” of mandates. The challenge for the organization is to redefine the norms throughout the district to be more coherent with the beliefs that underpin the strategy to shift more decision-making to schools, and then to figure out how to engage people in specific behaviors that reflect those norms. Senior managers at SFUSD still make decisions about which content is used around the district based on state-approved curriculum, but school-level leadership teams are given wide latitude regarding how to teach it. For employees at central office, this meant redefining their view of their roles as ones that serve and support the schools, and then acting accordingly. As one senior manager told us, “when we receive requests from schools we have to change our default answer from ‘no’, to ‘how can I help you make that happen?’ – that’s a big cultural shift for us.” For principals, teachers, and parents, the transition to behaviors consistent with a sense of ownership for the problem-solving, planning, and accountability necessary in this new environment is critical. Regardless of their position in the organization, everyone must embrace a sense of accountability for student achievement. Leaders at all levels of SFUSD acknowledge that they have come a long way, but have significant work left to do to institutionalize a culture that is coherent with their strategy. As a principal expressed, “For years our school site council was largely perfunctory – I needed them to sign off on things, but they didn’t make the calls,

so they didn't feel responsible for my decisions. We're making progress, but it's difficult."

Ackerman and her team made changes in the organizational **structure** to support the strategy and reinforce the necessary culture. Structure includes roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, and decision rights, among other things. First, the role of the principal was reshaped to more of a general management position with decision rights about the development and delivery of an annual academic plan and the allocation of financial and human resources necessary to achieve that plan. Locally elected school site councils (SSCs), which include teachers and parents, are now responsible for working with principals to develop annual academic plans based on student performance data from the prior year. These structural decisions about role definition, shifts in responsibilities, and decision rights are coherent with a strategy to place decisions and resources with adults closest to students, and bolster the culture of accountability. One parent who serves on a local school site council explained the coherence this provided: "Our academic plan used to be a laundry list of every program and activity we had ever done, including ones we probably wouldn't do again. There was something for everyone...we had to develop a new discipline to prioritize and explain only those activities we would actually pursue, because we had to link funding to everything mentioned in the plan."

To link funding to the academic plans, the SFUSD team implemented a new resource allocation **system** more coherent with their strategy, structure choices, and desired culture. Organizations use systems get work done – these include mechanisms such as annual planning, performance evaluation, compensation, data collection and

analysis, and resource allocation. Before the change, the central office assigned the number of teachers and support staff at each school based on student enrollment, along with a very small materials budget. This system did not take into account the unique student body of a school, nor was it coherent with the academic planning process that principals and SSCs were required to undertake each year. The new resource allocation system, called a weighted student formula (WSF), attaches a specific dollar amount to every child in the system based on a set of six non-racial criteria such as the academic performance of the school the child attended the previous year and his or her socio-economic status. The money then follows the student to the school they attend. As a result, the financial resources at each school are directly related to the specific group of learners enrolled there. The principal and SSC then allocate the revenue they receive from their total enrollment to the expenditures they determine are necessary to execute their academic plan. The WSF system is far from perfect, and certainly has its detractors, but continues to evolve. Every year, a cross-functional, multi-stakeholder team revisits the mechanics of the WSF to ensure that it continues to meet their objectives and remains coherent with the strategy and the interdependent processes related to it. As Ackerman told us, “Our version of the WSF doesn’t simply give principals more autonomy. The money is tied to a plan that is tied to goals that are measured by outcomes for which *everybody* is accountable, because *everybody* is involved: teachers, parents, principals, students, central office staff, and board members.”

Pushing resources, instructional decisions, and accountability to school communities required a significant investment in their capacity. An organization’s **capacity** is the combination of the skills, knowledge, and time of its people, and its

available financial and material resources such as technology and facilities. In SFUSD, the changes created a massive gap between what people knew how to do and what they would now be held accountable for. The district had to dramatically increase the ability of principals to drive their schools' academic planning processes, which required new skills in budgeting, student data analysis, and instructional leadership. Because of the involvement of school site councils in the process, principals were also required to develop deeper consensus building and stakeholder management skills. To support this effort and to increase the school site councils' proficiency in addressing student performance challenges, the district's research and evaluation department developed and delivered courses in analyzing a variety of performance indicators and linking instructional methods to student needs. These courses are also made available to teachers. Additionally, because the school site councils play such a central role, they receive direct support from the superintendent's office from a special assistant who spends a significant percentage of his time working to increase the capacity of these bodies to make effective decisions. The first two years of the effort were a considerable challenge as people around the district struggled up the learning curve, but by the third year the school-level staff and council members were much more adept at operating in the new environment, and central office employees were better equipped to support them.

SFUSD struggles to manage its **stakeholder** relationships in ways that are coherent with its strategy and other organizational elements, with mixed results. When Ackerman's leadership team was developing Excellence for All, they conducted a series of public input sessions and school meetings all over the city that attracted 3000 teachers, parents, and community members, 2500 of whom completed an open-ended feedback

form about a preliminary draft of the plan. The input was incorporated into the final version. The WSF was a product of a multi-stakeholder team that included over 40 teachers, parents, community leaders, principals, and district staff. This group continues to meet periodically to monitor the effectiveness of the WSF and refine it to keep pace with the district's current needs. However, the tough choices that Ackerman and her team made to drive high-performance through increased accountability for adults have taken their toll on some stakeholder relationships. In the first three years of her tenure, she and the teachers' union leadership worked together to implement many of the key elements of the strategy. Since 2003, however, this relationship has deteriorated with the election of new union officials who utilize an oppositional rather than cooperative approach. The school board underwent a similar transition in 2004, requiring Ackerman and her team to reallocate significant managerial time and attention to managing these stakeholder relationships in order to keep the strategy on track.

District leaders typically have little control over their **environment** – federal and state regulations, funding sources, and local politics. SFUSD faces all of the external challenges that we described earlier in this article, and expends enormous time and energy in managing them. One interesting tactic is worth mentioning. Ackerman took a novel approach and converted a considerable environmental constraint into a powerful enabler. Like many urban districts, SFUSD was operating under a federal consent decree to address lingering vestiges of segregation when Ackerman arrived in 2000. The federal judge monitoring the order issued a set of targets the district was required to meet by the 2005-2006 school year. Superintendents usually view these judicial interventions as constraints on their ability to implement their own reform plans. Ackerman, however,

saw coherence between what the judge required and the results she wanted to accomplish in raising the bar and closing the gap. When the judge demanded a detailed plan to address his order, Ackerman decided to align the development of Excellence for All with his requirements. In the spring of 2001 the judge approved Excellence for All, the district's strategic plan, as the official response to his court order. In effect, this move made the implementation of Ackerman's strategy mandatory. In order to radically alter the pillars of the strategy, stakeholder groups such as the school board or union leadership would have to appeal to the federal judge. This accomplishment has provided stability to the fundamental elements of the plan, while allowing for periodic adjustments, with approval from the judge, as the district learns more about which actions are most effective at driving student performance results.

We are not endorsing SFUSD's strategy as the 'right' one or even necessarily better than others. Our intention is simply to demonstrate how a set of decisions about organizational elements can be coherent with a strategy that produces results. Other urban districts are implementing different strategies and are producing results as they strive for organizational coherence. For example in Long Beach, CA, the district's continuous improvement over many years is attributed to great coherence between its strategy and **stakeholder** relationships, particularly with the school board. Montgomery County, MD has achieved results through the use of real-time student performance data to improve instruction by investing heavily in **capacity** -- both in technology infrastructure and the skills and knowledge of its people to use the data to make effective decisions. In Philadelphia, PA, the district strategy to improve the quality of instruction across schools has led to a fundamental revamping of the **system** by which teachers are hired. Aldine,

TX, recently named one of the five highest performing urban districts in the country (along with San Francisco), implemented a **structure** that fosters healthy competition across mini-districts managed coherently by area superintendents in support of its strategy to empower schools and teachers to work together to raise student achievement. Like San Francisco, all four of these districts are also actively engaged in building a **culture** of accountability among their staff and students. Depending on a district's particular performance challenges and context, any number of strategies might be effective, as long as they focus on the classroom as the driver of student performance. A popular adage in business is that the "A+" execution of a "B+" strategy trumps the "B+" execution of an "A+" strategy every time. We agree, and our work suggests that achieving coherence is a key factor in laying the groundwork for "A+" execution of a variety of strategies.

Professional leaders of public school districts can take specific actions to move their districts towards coherence. But there is also something that the community of interested stakeholders can do to achieve this objective. With each stakeholder pushing a different agenda, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to successfully execute and sustain a coherent strategy that drives excellence in the classroom. Stakeholders, whether corporate leaders, parents, board members or funders must agree on a set of realistic expectations of performance; stop the incessant second guessing of leaders; and commit to supporting and sustaining a strategy for student improvement. District leaders, freed from the continuous and distracting wrangling with key stakeholders will then be able to devote the bulk of their time and energy to their primary function – improving educational results for all students.

The PELP project has only begun to explore the potential power of outstanding management in public education as a driver of high performance. Our challenge is to deepen the knowledge about the initial set of managerial challenges identified by PELP's partner districts. As the link between improved management and educational outcomes becomes better understood and accepted, we hope school districts will create the demand that encourages other schools of business and education, as well as consultants to work together to extend and strengthen this emerging knowledge industry.

Related notes and case available through Harvard Business School Publishing:

Childress, Stacey, Richard Elmore, Allen Grossman, and Modupe Akinola. "Note on the PELP Coherence Framework", Public Education Leadership Project, PEL-010, November 2004.

Childress, Stacey and Robert Peterkin. "Pursuing Educational Equity: Aligning Resources at San Francisco Unified School District", Public Education Leadership Project, PEL-005, July 2004.

Childress, Stacey. "A Note on Strategy in Public Education", Public Education Leadership Project, PEL-011, June 2004.