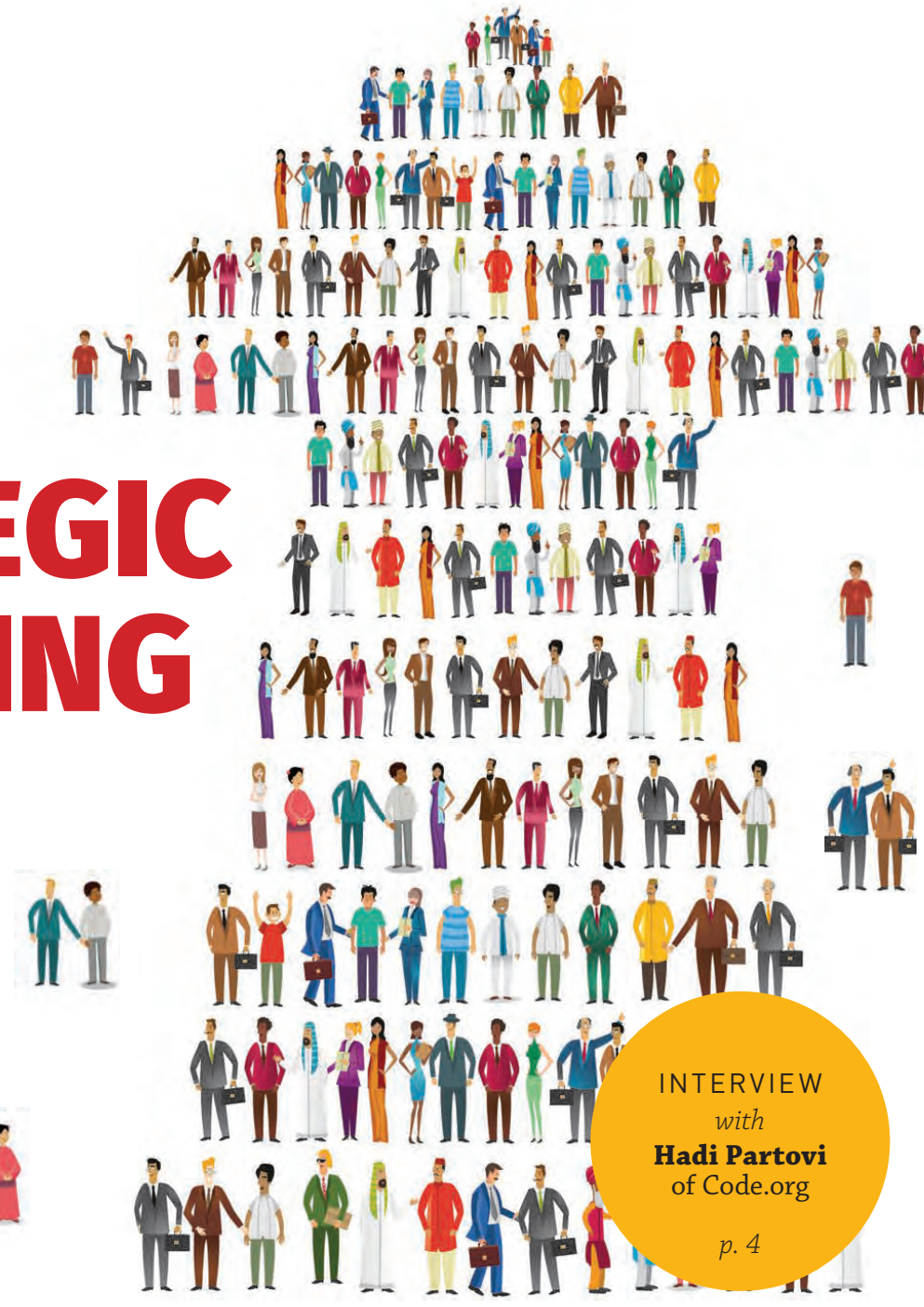
SPRING 2016 | Volume 19

DMJ

the **DISTRICT MANAGEMENT JOURNAL**



STRATEGIC PLANNING

for Today's Challenges

INTERVIEW
with
Hadi Partovi
of Code.org
p. 4

A Publication of

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

dmcouncil.org

on

dmcouncil.org

READ

A Better Way to Budget

Building Support for Bold, Student-Centered Change in Public Schools

Check out DMC President Nathan Levenson's new book, *A Better Way to Budget: Building Support for Bold, Student-Centered Change in Public Schools.* This book provides practical advice and tactical strategies for overcoming the political obstacles that can keep funds from being allocated to best support students. Levenson shows how to improve the budgeting process to normalize change, minimize pushback, and build public buy-in for needed reforms.

To purchase, visit dmcouncil.org/better-budget or contact info@dmcouncil.org.

REGISTER NOW

Leadership Development Meetings

Shifting Resources to Support Strategic Priorities

April 28-29, 2016	**Chicago, IL**
October 13-14, 2016	**Washington, DC**
November 3-4, 2016	**Boston, MA**

Don't miss this unique opportunity for superintendents, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, principals, and other district leaders to learn and collaborate to shift resources within the existing budget to fund strategic initiatives that will do more for students. DMC will bring its leading research, practical insights, and strategies to this professional development conference designed specifically for cross-functional district leadership teams.

To register, visit dmcouncil.org/ldm or email events@dmcouncil.org.

Kathleen Choi, managing editor, has a background in international finance, strategy consulting, and copywriting. Kathy holds an A.B. from Harvard College and an M.P.P. from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Christopher Cleveland, associate, works closely with school districts on projects spanning special education and intervention, scheduling, and resource allocation. Christopher holds an A.B. in sociology, with a minor in mind, brain, behavior (MBB) from Harvard College.

Pia Durkin is superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools (MA). Her prior experience includes serving as superintendent of Attleboro Public Schools (MA) and as assistant superintendent of special education, guidance, and other student services at Boston Public Schools (MA). Pia holds a B.A. in elementary education from Queens College, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from New York University.

John J-H Kim, founder and CEO of DMC, is responsible for ensuring that DMC brings the best management and leadership practices to its members. He is also a senior lecturer at the Harvard Business School. John holds an A.B. from Harvard College and an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School.

Nathan Levenson, president of DMC, oversees all consulting activities and directs the development of technology solutions. Nathan holds a B.A. from Dartmouth College and an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School, and is a graduate of the Broad Foundation Urban Superintendents Academy.

Rachel Melikan, senior marketing manager, works to broaden awareness of DMC's services and to deepen engagement with our membership. Rachel holds a B.A. in Russian and Eastern European studies from Wesleyan University and an M.P.A. from Suffolk University.

Kriti Parashar, director, works with large urban school districts on projects spanning human capital, strategic planning, district turnaround, and special education. She holds a B.A. from Delhi University and an M.B.A. from Stanford University.

Sam Ribnick, director, works closely with school districts in strategic plan implementation, human capital development, and resource allocation. Sam has a background in teaching, and holds a B.S. in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Diane Ullman, senior director, leads consulting projects across multiple practice areas including human capital management, turnaround, and strategic planning. Diane brings to DMC her experiences as a former superintendent and as Chief Talent Officer for the Connecticut State Department of Education. Diane holds a B.A. from Regis College, a master's degree from Northeastern University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Colorado.

DMJ
the **DISTRICT MANAGEMENT JOURNAL**

PUBLISHING

Editor-in-Chief and Chief Executive Officer: John J-H Kim

Managing Editor: Kathleen Choi

Editorial Director: Nathan Levenson

Contributing Writers/Researchers: Christopher Cleveland, Pia Durkin, John J-H Kim, Rachel Melikan, Kriti Parashar, Sam Ribnick, Diane Ullman

Editorial Production: Marisa Carlson

Art Direction, Design, Production: Holland-Mark, Boston, MA

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

EDITORIAL OFFICES

133 Federal Street
Boston, MA 02110
Tel. 877-DMC-3500
www.dmcouncil.org

To order reprints of articles, call 877-DMC-3500 or email kchoi@dmcouncil.org.

To advertise in *The District Management Journal,* please call 877-DMC-3500 or email kchoi@dmcouncil.org.

Letters are welcome and should be addressed to the Editor, The District Management Council, 133 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110, or emailed to letters@dmcouncil.org.

SUBMISSIONS

The District Management Journal welcomes submissions. Unsolicited manuscripts will be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

SUBSCRIBE

Become a member of The District Management Council at dmcouncil.org and *The District Management Journal* is included in your membership.

ISSN: 2162-0490 (print)
ISSN: 2162-0504 (online)
The District Management Council

DMC partners with public school district leaders to improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation. By collaborating with a nationwide network of districts and distilling best practices research, DMC delivers actionable solutions and implementation support.

VOLUME 19

Printed in the U.S.A.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

From the Editor

Living your Strategic Plan

While putting together this issue on Strategic Planning, I often thought of Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen's article "How Will You Measure Your Life?" Applying academic business theories taught in his class, Christensen offered his students advice on finding meaning and happiness in life. He noted the importance of having a strategy for one's life:

> Over the years I've watched the fates of my HBS [Harvard Business School] classmates from 1979 unfold; I've seen more and more of them come to reunions unhappy, divorced, and alienated from their children. I can guarantee you that not a single one of them graduated with the deliberate strategy of getting divorced and raising children who would become estranged from them. And yet a shocking number of them implemented that strategy. The reason? They didn't keep the purpose of their lives front and center as they decided how to spend their time, talents, and energy.

This insightful story lends a weightiness to our hour-to-hour and day-to-day decisions about how we spend our time. Indeed, in our work lives, how often do we drop everything to attend to urgent issues instead of investing our time and talents in the strategic issues we know we should focus on?

In this issue, we explore the topic of strategic planning—not only defining ultimate goals, but breaking them down to discrete actions to be executed on a day-to-day basis. At work and at home, we must find a way to live our strategic plan each day if we are to achieve the results to which we aspire.

John J-H Kim

*"How Will You Measure Your Life? Don't Reserve Your Best Business Thinking for Your Career," by Clayton M. Christensen, *Harvard Business Review,* July–August 2010, p. 46. This article later became a book entitled *How Will You Measure Your Life?* by Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth and Karen Dillon, published by Harper Collins in 2012.

What Most Schools Don't Teach:

Code.org Hadi Partovi's Mission to Bring Computer Science to Schools

Tech entrepreneur Hadi Partovi, founder of iLike and advisor to a variety of game-changing companies such as Facebook and Dropbox, wanted to make a positive impact on the world and provide greater access to what he calls "the best career path you could go into." In 2013, Partovi launched Code.org, an education nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to computer science and increasing participation by women and underrepresented students of color.

In his initial video, *What Most Schools Don't Teach,* Partovi enlisted the support of Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, athlete Chris Bosh, celebrity will.i.am, and the founders of Twitter, Dropbox, and Zappos, among others, to encourage more students to learn to code. Partovi was thrust into the education sector as the video reached approximately 20,000 teachers and 10 million viewers.

To build on this momentum, Partovi launched Code.org's Hour of Code, a one-hour introduction to computer science that makes coding fun with exercises that include popular characters from *Star Wars, Frozen,* and *Angry Birds.* In less than three years, Code.org has reached over 200 million students through the Hour of Code; even President Obama has participated. Nearly 300,000 teachers have signed up to teach the introductory courses on Code.org's learning platform, and nearly 10 million students have enrolled. Now Code.org is partnering with 100 of the largest school districts to add computer science to the curriculum, and is thereby reaching 10% of all U.S. students.

In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim and DMC Associate Christopher Cleveland, Hadi Partovi discusses Code.org's success in creating a groundswell of interest, and how the organization is partnering with school districts to provide students with computer science skills for the 21st century.

Hadi Partovi
Founder, Code.org

How did you first get interested in technology?

My personal story is one of opportunity and the American Dream. I was an immigrant from Iran, and my childhood was spent in Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the war with Iraq. I lived right near the TV station in Tehran, so our neighborhood was literally a bombing target for fighter planes every night. It was not a great place to grow up. However, my life changed tremendously when my dad brought home a Commodore 64 computer that he imported from Italy. My dad said, "This doesn't have any games on it, but you can learn to code. Here's a book. Teach yourself and make your own games." By the time our family came to the United States when I was 12, I'd gotten good enough at computer programming that I managed to get amazing summer jobs as a high school student working at tech companies. I ended up majoring in computer science and having a great career in the tech industry, and I completely attribute this to my early exposure to the field when I was 10 years old.

What gave rise to your interest in promoting computer science education?

Within my own career arc and having been an entrepreneur and a manager at many tech companies, I've seen directly how much opportunity is being created in the world of software and how much software is changing every industry, not just the tech industry. I first got interested in this issue because of the vocational angle—seeing the shortage of people accessing these amazing jobs. I also felt strongly that teaching coding and computer science is a way to address important issues of income disparity and inequality of opportunity.

I saw that the level of learning I got a chance to teach myself is still not integrated in the vast majority of America's schools. Teaching kids computer science seems completely fundamental, and more importantly, it's just the best career path you could go into. As a software engineer, you can dream of anything and then build it and then see it in the hands of millions of people and have tremendous impact. It's such a fulfilling feeling to be able to do that. And we're not trying to get kids into it because our schools aren't even teaching it. That seemed to me like a problem we should solve.

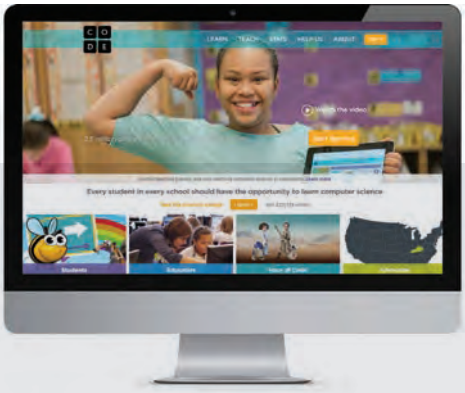
About Code.org

Launched in 2013, Code.org is a nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to computer science and increasing participation by women and underrepresented students of color. Our vision is that every student in every school should have the opportunity to learn computer science. We believe computer science should be part of the core curriculum, alongside other courses such as biology, chemistry, or algebra.

STATS FROM **CODE.ORG**

Computer science drives innovation throughout the U.S. economy, but it remains marginalized in K-12 education.

- Only **29** states allow students to count computer science courses toward high school graduation.
- There are currently **559,321** unfilled computing jobs nationwide.
- Last year, only **42,969** computer science students graduated into the workforce.



Since its launch in **2013,** Code.org has achieved the following:

232,873,942 have tried the Hour of Code (49% female).

307,182 teachers have signed up to teach introductory courses on Code Studio.

10,243,809 students are enrolled.

25,000 new teachers have been trained to teach computer science across grades K-12.

100 of the largest school districts have partnered with Code.org to add computer science to the curriculum. These districts teach almost **10%** of all U.S. students and **15%** of Hispanic and African American students.

In its online courses, **45%** of students are girls and **45%** are Black or Hispanic. In its high school classrooms, **37%** are girls, and **56%** are African American or Hispanic.

Courses are available in **45+ languages,** and used in **180+ countries.**

What prompted you to start Code.org?

In 2009, I sold my startup iLike to Myspace, and after a short time, I decided to leave Myspace. I didn't want to jump into anything full-time, so I took on numerous advisory consulting gigs: I became an advisor to Facebook, to Dropbox, to another startup that recently went public called Opower, and I joined the boards of several companies. I was biding my time, trying to sort out what I wanted to do next.

If I had to pick the moment that gave rise to Code.org, it actually would be the night of Steve Jobs' death. When Steve Jobs died, every American and, I think, many around the world felt the loss of a great entrepreneur. But, what I saw was the passing of a guy who was only 13 or 14 years older than me, and I started wondering, "What's my impact going to be on the world in 13 or 14 years?"

There's a video that went viral when he died which if you haven't seen it, I highly recommend. It's a version of an ad that Apple never ran, narrated by Steve Jobs, and although I can't quote it exactly, the message is basically, "At Apple, we believe in the crazy ones—the people who are crazy enough to believe they can change the world, and maybe they actually can." And I remember watching that video that night and thinking, "What's my role in changing the world? What if I have only 13 years left? What am I going to do?"

For years I had been brainstorming the idea of making a video to recruit students, teachers, and others to learn to code. I'd always assumed that Steve Jobs would be one of the people in that video. So I started thinking, "You know, I have this idea and I'm not even acting on it, and my potential cast members are dying and I'm sitting here not doing anything." That was the kick in the pants that I really should get going and make the video.

Why do you think that studying coding and computer science hasn't taken hold on its own to the degree needed?

In the mid-1990s when the World Wide Web was exploding with activity, I remember going back to Harvard and asking my dean of Applied Science, "Why isn't computer science part of the

– **9 in 10** parents want their child to study computer science, but only **1 in 4** schools teach computer programming.
– **71%** of all new jobs in STEM are in computing, but only **8%** of STEM graduates are in computer science.
– Women who try AP Computer Science in high school are **ten times** more likely to major in it in college, and Black and Hispanic students are **seven times** more likely.
– A computer science major can earn **40% more** than the average college graduate.
– The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that there will be over **1 million** computing job openings by **2024.** These are jobs in every industry and every state.

Harvard core curriculum? Why would we allow somebody to graduate with a liberal arts degree and not have at least a basic understanding of how computers, algorithms, and software work, because lots of other science fields are considered part of the core curriculum. Why not this one?" He actually gave a very interesting answer. He said supply and demand should take care of it. As opportunities increase, more students will go into the field and more schools will be teaching it.

And this was something I kept thinking back on as I was working in the field. It had become clear to me that K-12 education does not react to supply and demand. I'm not even sure if higher education reacts to supply and demand, but K-12 systems definitely do not. They're driven by state policies, and their goal is to teach foundational stuff to eight-year-olds and ten-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds. The feedback loop of knowing whether we are teaching nine-year-olds the right things so that they can get into the right careers is very slow. And, in general, I think there is this tension that exists in education. Everyone wants kids to have opportunities, but educators like to think that they're educating kids rather than providing vocational training.

Is that why you named the first video *What Most Schools Don't Teach?*

The plan wasn't to create an educational organization with a mission to bring computer science to schools. My initial plan was just to make a video to popularize this issue, and then I'd figure out what would come afterward, if anything.

The reason I even got the web domain Code.org is because I'd recruited Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Jack Dorsey, and will.i.am to be in this video and I figured I couldn't just put it out on my own personal YouTube channel. With such notable people involved, I needed a website, so I spent some money to buy a great name. But there was no plan for Code.org other than to just put a video on it.

For the video, I wanted a name that would get people to click on it and share it, so I was optimizing for both the title and the thumbnail that shows on Facebook. Three days before the video launched, I ran a bunch of teaser ads on Facebook with a matrix of five different thumbnail images and five different titles to see which combination would get the most clicks. We ran 25 different ads with every combination of titles and thumbnails. "What Most Schools Don't Teach" with the photos of Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates got by far the most clicks, and that's how we chose it.

Teaching kids computer science seems completely fundamental, and more importantly, it's just the best career path you could go into.

For our first video, there wasn't one Code.org video; there were two Code.org videos. We weren't sure which would go viral, so there were two different cuts of the exact same interviews. One was five minutes long; the other was nine minutes long. We launched both simultaneously and then we looked to see which one actually got shared more, and we made that the video and the other one became the backup. Code.org has always had a culture of a tech startup, and I regularly say that we're a tech startup first and an education nonprofit second. We're a mix of both. We do things differently.

How did you move from that first video to the Hour of Code?

What happened is the video got about 10 million views and the website had a petition for people to say, "I think it's important for students to have the opportunity to learn computer science"—it's the same petition we have on our site today. If you filled out the petition and you were a teacher, we had the option for you to say you want more information about this for your school. In the first week, we had somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 teachers reach out saying, "We want this in

our schools." I had originally thought we would get hundreds or maybe a thousand teachers and that I would connect them to local nonprofits. But when we got 15,000 to 20,000 teachers that first week, we had no idea how to move forward. Code.org was a one-man operation with a two-page website! Those teachers were the inspiration for building today's Code.org.

I remember thinking, we had engaged 10 million people and tens of thousands of educators to watch this video, and the only follow-up we had was to have them sign a petition. What could I possibly do to get 10 million people to pay attention to this issue again, and what could we do for these 15,000 educators? The answer to that question is how the Hour of Code came into being. The idea was to get 10 million people to do one Hour of Code. I picked the number 10 million because we if we got 10 million to watch a video, maybe we could get 10 million again.

We decided to align the Hour of Code with the next Computer Science Education Week, which gave us a six-month lead-time. We wanted to build up tutorials, develop marketing campaigns, have grassroots outreach, but most importantly develop the follow-through. The follow-through this time wasn't just to get people to try the Hour of Code, but to have this be the first step: if you're a teacher, go on to teach computer science; if you're a student, take an online course; if you're a parent, get active as an advocate, and so on.

But should everyone really be learning to code? What's the rationale?

I realize only maybe 3% or 5% of Americans are going to become software engineers, but the other 95% of people in this country should still have some basic understanding of how computers work, how the Internet works, what's inside an app, what's an algorithm. People should know these things for the same reason we teach children things like what chlorophyll is or how electricity works. These kids aren't going to become botanists and electricians, but we just teach it because it's foundational to an understanding of the world. And that is actually a more motivating thing for me because it's a recognition that computer science as a field has reached the maturity and the impact of these other fields and it should be included in a liberal arts education for all students.

You brought a very unique combination of resources to launch this effort. You got *Angry Birds* and Disney to allow you to use their cherished characters for the Hour of Code. Why did you feel that was so important?

I had a personal view, which is just from my own experience, that if it was done the right way, not only could computer science become a course, but it could actually become the most engaging, fun, and relevant course for students. Most of what we learn in school is a curriculum that was designed 200 years ago after the industrial revolution. And looking at my own school experiences, so much of it was memorizing information that I probably won't ever use again, and regurgitating it on multiple-choice tests.

Meanwhile, computer science lies at the middle of multiple things. It's analytical like math, but it's also creative like art class and creative writing class. It's foundational like algebra

Hadi Partovi's Biographical Timeline

1984
Immigrated to U.S. from Iran

1990–1994
Harvard University
B.A. and M.S., Computer Science

1995–1999
Microsoft
Group Program Manager

1999–2001
TellMe Networks
Vice President and founding team member

2002–2005
Microsoft
General Manager

or trigonometry, but it's vocational in that it leads to the best dang jobs in the world. And then lastly, it's culturally relevant, the way sports are. You know, kids love sports because that's what they see on TV, but they also love Instagram and Snapchat. You know what I mean?

I started thinking about how we could get the courses to feel fun. And to make them fun, making them feel like a game was a natural plus. It's hard to make a game that teaches you chemistry or a game that teaches you history, but it's easy to make a game that teaches you to code. In fact, when we started thinking about this, there were already a few games out there that taught this stuff. A very popular tool called Lightbot was used even as early as elementary school by computer scientists. Lightbot is an app where you give code to a little robot to make it walk around. I figured Code.org could do the exact same thing, but using Angry Birds or other popular characters.

PopCap with *Plants versus Zombies* agreed first, and then Rovio with *Angry Birds*. After the success of what we did with *Angry Birds,* Disney came to us. Having Disney come to us and raise the discussion of our using Anna and Elsa from *Frozen* was incredible. It happened to be the most popular movie for kids ever. And then the subsequent year, *Star Wars* and *Minecraft* wanted to do it too.

You use the terms "coding" and "computer science." Can you talk about the difference?

Actually, at Code.org, we almost never talk about coding. There are only two ways we use the word "coding," and that is in the name of our organization and in the name of the movement, the Hour of Code. Almost all of our language everywhere else is about computer science. And it's important for us to use both words. When people ask, "How do you compare coding and computer science? What's the difference between them?" the analogy I use is that it's like comparing grammar to English literature.

By far the biggest challenge we've had to overcome … has been the perception or the assumption that computer science and coding is for geniuses.

We don't just teach kids grammar; we teach them reading and writing and literature. Of course, part of that is learning how to read or write a grammatically correct sentence. But the interesting, creative aspect of writing and reading literature is much broader than that. In computer science, coding one particular language and one particular syntax is easy. Learning how to solve difficult problems using that code, making complicated algorithms, designing data structures and user interface design, understanding how the Internet works, and knowing about cybersecurity are all part of computer science. The field is much deeper and broader than just coding, and it has more relevance to more people.

The reason we use the terms "coding" and "computer science" is because "computer science" as a term is more ill-defined. In fact, when we first started meeting with school administrators and said, "You know, we think you should teach computer science," the common response was, "Oh yeah, we just bought tablets for all our kids." And we would think to ourselves, "What do you mean? That doesn't have anything to do with what I just asked you!" Schools often confuse computer science with ed tech or purchasing

2006–2009	2009–2010	1996–Present	2010–Present	2013–Present
iLike	MySpace	Various Startups	Taser International	Code.org
President/COO	SVP of Technology	Advisor/Investor	Board Director	Founder, CEO

We have always been dealing with schools that want to make this work, so for us, it has always been more of a question of how we can solve their problems.

hardware. Whereas when you ask them about coding, they'll say, "Oh, we don't do that." Coding is the easier, more popularly understood entrée into the field of computer science.

But what we are actually teaching is not just coding. If you look at the actual courses that kids are taking in our programs, we're teaching concepts like loops and functions and variables without even teaching any syntax, and we have exercises that teach how the Internet works, the importance of cybersecurity, how data encryption works, how compression works, how information is stored in binary—all those types of things have nothing to do with coding; they're more about learning how the world works.

What has been the hardest challenge your organization has had to overcome?

By far the biggest challenge we've had to overcome among school teachers, educators, parents, and students has been the perception or the assumption that computer science and coding is for geniuses. We want to get everybody, but especially teachers, to recognize that the students in their classrooms can learn the ABCs and 123s of computer science. Our goal is to convince you that computer science isn't an honors class, it's a kindergarten class. My dad has a Ph.D. in theoretical physics and I remember as a student wondering, "Should I become a physicist like my father?" I learned enough physics to realize that understanding special relativity or general relativity or quantum mechanics is really hard, and computer science is actually much easier. And the basics of coding are way easier—every field starts with the ABCs and 123s.

It's not hard to convince people that technology is changing the world and that it's important. Everybody gets that. But the idea that your nine-year-old kid in your low-income school can actually learn what it takes to get started down the path of being the next Mark Zuckerberg, that's the hard part. The stereotype of someone interested in computer science is a teenage white boy in a dark basement with an energy drink and *Star Wars* posters and things like that. They don't think of a Latina girl who's nine years old in a Los Angeles urban elementary school. Changing that stereotype has been our most important objective.

And some basic logistics of adding computer science to the curriculum have been challenging as well, right?

Absolutely. Things like who's going to teach the course and where will it fit in the schedule are big obstacles when working in schools. Everyone's busy. But one good thing is we have always been dealing with schools that want to make this work, so for us, it has always been more of a question of how we can solve their problems. You know, most ed reform efforts are trying to do things for schools that the schools don't want. Whether it's longer school hours, smaller classrooms, teacher accountability, more assessments, fewer assessments, there are all these different arguments about how to make schools better, but most of those initiatives aren't led by the teachers themselves wanting it. Most of them are led by some philanthropist or government official or whoever trying to impose a better way to do it, whereas we from day one had 15,000 to 20,000 teachers who wanted this; that desire more than anything else has helped us overcome obstacles.

We've also used funding to overcome obstacles, so we would pay for teacher training, and initially, we'd even pay for salaries of teachers while they were going through the training so that every school who wanted to work with us could get a trained teacher to teach the course. We did what we could to make it as easy as possible for a school that wanted to make it work.

So, what's the ultimate goal for Code.org?

The goal for Code.org isn't for Code.org to be taught in every school. It's for computer science to be taught in every school. There is no biology.org or math.org that's trying to get these subjects taught in every school; it's just part of the system. We ask ourselves, "What are all the pieces that need to change for

computer science to become like math and biology in the school system?" We think of ourselves as a change agent, and the end game is for computer science to be taught in every school. This means they have curriculum, teachers, a course schedule that includes it, graduation requirements that encourage it, state policies that fund it, and schools of education training new teachers to teach it. Getting to that end game may take a lot of time, but I also think the momentum behind this is not only big, but is accelerating.

Recently the president of the United States announced that computer science is no longer an optional skill. He says it's a basic skill alongside the three Rs. The president says this not just because he thinks so, but because polls show that the majority of Americans believe computer science is that essential at this point. It shows that we've moved perception enough that people really believe in the importance of computer science, and the momentum behind this is significant.

Now, whether Congress funds the president's Computer Science for All initiative or whether the state governors fund the plan, I think we're entering a new chapter for Code.org because computer science has reached a level of importance that the highest officers are thinking of it as worth pursuing. We as an organization don't think that we can just give up and let the government do it all. I don't think any American looks at our government that way. But we do think government funding will really change the game in terms of the pace. I think there are a lot of schools that want to adopt computer science and don't have the wherewithal to do so. We can help, but we'd like to see the government play a real role in funding that change.

I'm personally hopeful that within five years we'll see our goal realized of every single school in this country teaching computer science. If you had asked me that earlier, I would have said it's impossible, but it's quite likely now.

Are you worried that if Congress gets involved, this will become one of those reform movements that is being done "to you" instead of "by you"?

I'm not worried about that for two reasons. First, because the grassroots demand is there, and second, because Congress isn't looking at it as a mandate. The way it's being pitched is as funds for schools that want to apply for them.

I almost would say it's imperative that Congress pass something just because the intense desire is there in a fully bipartisan way among American citizens, among the governors, among the schools. I'm not sure what will happen, but we're going to stay hopeful for some change.

Do you have a message for superintendents and district leaders?

More than anything else, I would ask superintendents to think of computer science the same way they think about any other academic field that students start in elementary school and learn through middle and high school. This is something that your teachers *can* teach to your students.

The largest districts in this country have already embraced this belief, and many of them have made computer science foundational. In Broward County, the sixth-largest school district, every single high school teaches computer science today. In Charles County in Maryland, every high school, middle school, and elementary school already teaches computer science. These districts started down this path less than three years ago. It's not hard to do; it just takes a little bit of will. You'd probably be surprised to find that in surveys, over 50% of all teachers believe that this should be taught and that it should be required for students to learn. So, your teachers want this to be something that's taught in schools. I hope that administrators recognize this demand. ◆

STRATEGIC PLANNING

for Today's Challenges

John J-H Kim and Kriti Parashar

DMC Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of the District Management Council

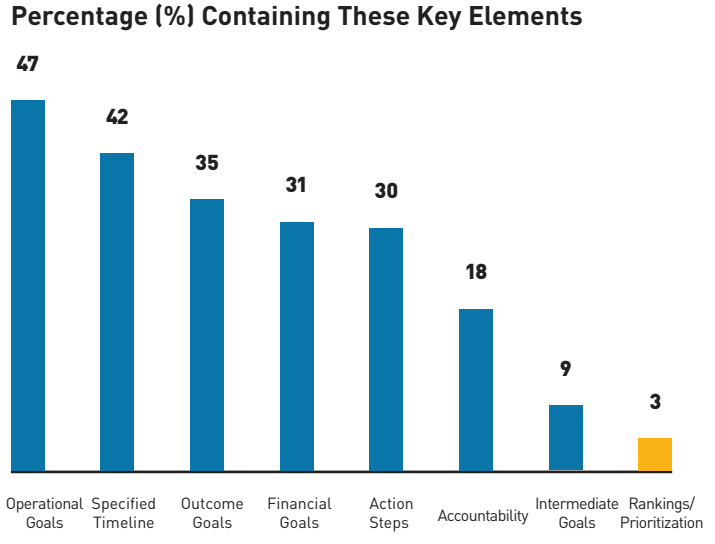
The idea of developing and generating a comprehensive and cohesive set of actions to guide a complex operation goes back to ancient times. In ancient Greece, the *strategos*, or "general," focused on developing a plan to position and maneuver the armed forces for advantage against their opponents.[1] For centuries, philosophers, merchants, generals, politicians, and academics have worked to create well-crafted approaches to help navigate a complex world in order to achieve success. Most people credit modern strategic planning to the Harvard Policy Model, introduced by Harvard Business School in the 1920s, which gave birth to the SWOT Analysis, the systematic assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.[2] In the modern era, companies like Southwest Airlines have thrived for decades in a heavily regulated, unionized, and brutally competitive industry by implementing a clearly articulated strategy: Southwest, for example, provides point-to-point destination routes, operational excellence, and distinctively upbeat staff, all at a low fare, and has rabid fans to show for it. Today, virtually all organizations view strategic planning as essential to their ability to thrive and avoid being disrupted.

Strategic Planning in Districts Today

Almost all U.S. public school districts, regardless of size, geography, or demographics, have a strategic plan. Indeed, with districts facing rising expectations, mounting student needs, tightening budgets, and increasing regulation, strategic planning is more critical than ever to navigate these challenges amid the competing interests of a wide variety of stakeholders.

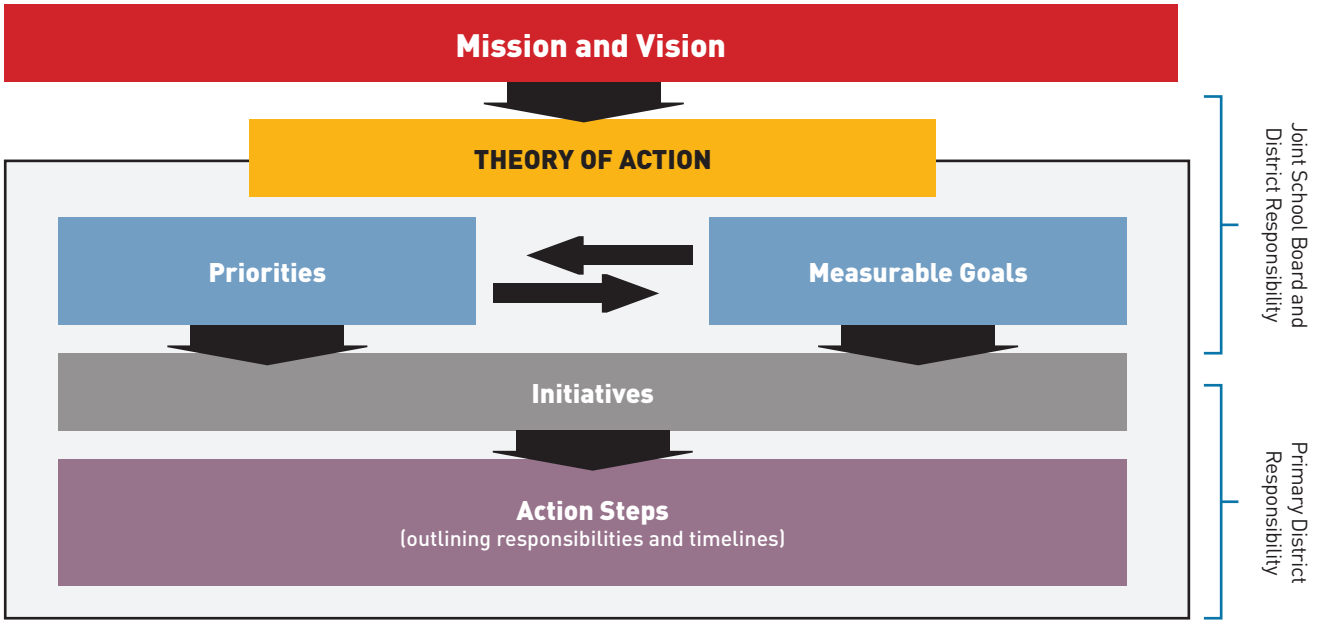
While almost all school districts have a strategic plan, a closer look reveals that the majority of these plans are likely not serving the function that they were designed to serve. Most districts' strategic plans have well-articulated vision and mission statements, yet lack prioritization of action or the measurement metrics that would turn these plans into useful operating guides. In many cases, they contain a very long list of initiatives and projects that satisfy the wish lists of the various stakeholders, but are too lengthy and too unfocused for any district to deliver on well. A few years ago, DMC conducted research on approximately 400 strategic plans around the country and found that, in fact, only 3% of the strategic plans contained any kind of prioritization or ranking of initiatives (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1 **KEY ELEMENTS OF DISTRICT STRATEGIC PLANS**



Source: DMC study of approximately 400 strategic plans

Exhibit 2 **DMC'S STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK**



DEFINITIONS

Mission and Vision: Long-term district aspirations

Theory of Action: Fundamental belief about what will lead to long-term success in the district

Priorities: Broad areas of focus to support the Theory of Action

Measurable Goals: Specific and measurable targets related to district Priorities

Initiatives: Specific projects related to Priorities that help to achieve the Measurable Goals

Action Steps: An articulation of what steps need to occur, by when, and by whom

Source: DMC

DMC believes that a powerful strategic plan articulates the overarching goal, but then distills this to a small set (e.g., five or six) of the most important levers that can be integrated and incorporated into all district activities to drive improvement.

This type of approach will

- Focus action on the most important levers for improving performance
- Align all district stakeholders on a clear path forward
- Guide allocation of the district's limited resources (financial, human capital, and others)
- Bring a greater degree of coherence between the district leadership and the governance body (school board)

To manage competing interests and accomplish all of this, DMC has developed a framework and approach that has been battle-tested over many years in districts of all sizes and across the country.

DMC's Strategic Planning Framework

DMC's Strategic Planning Framework is the result of deep research and refinements that have emanated from our work over the years helping many districts put powerful strategic plans into practice. DMC's framework connects a broad vision for the district with concrete goals and implementation tactics that are aligned and interconnected (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 3 **DMC'S STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

1. Form steering committee

2. Conduct needs assessment
- A. Gather quantitative information
- B. Collect qualitative input (Stakeholder Engagement, Part I)
- C. Perform root cause analysis

3. Draft strategic plan
- A. Develop Theory of Action
- B. Define district Priorities
- C. Identify Measurable Goals

4. Engage with stakeholders (Stakeholder Engagement, Part II)

5. Define Initiatives

6. Identify Action Steps

7. Manage and report on progress of implementation

Source: DMC

The framework begins by articulating a long-term vision and mission, something that many districts already have in place. With this vision and mission clearly in the forefront, the district must then define a Theory of Action (TOA) putting forth the core beliefs which will support the mission/vision and lead to the desired outcomes. Because the TOA is a foundational element, it envelops all components of the framework. Utilizing the TOA, the district next defines its Priorities—those areas of focus deemed critical to supporting the achievement of the district's long-term vision. These Priorities must be accompanied by Measurable Goals because it is critical that a district determine a way to measure progress from the outset. DMC's framework is distinctive in that it places Priorities and Measurable Goals at the forefront, which then connect to the implementation phase, where Initiatives and Action Steps turn aspirations into results.

The DMC framework is also distinctive in that it delineates the roles and responsibilities of the school board vis-à-vis the district team. School boards are ideally situated and organized to be actively involved in the articulation of the TOA, the Priorities, and the Measurable Goals. Defining the Initiatives and Action Steps, however, should be the provenance of the superintendent and his or her staff. Because the work is very fluid, creating some distinction in the roles provides greater focus and greater ownership. Taken together, these interconnected elements ensure a cohesive and actionable strategic plan.

Developing a Strategic Plan That's Up to the Challenge

Developing a strategic plan to meet today's challenges is a three-phase holistic process (Exhibit 3):

The Pre-work Phase provides the all-important foundation; it ensures the inclusion of an appropriate group of stakeholders, and provides a picture and diagnosis of the district's current state.

The Design Phase involves articulating the Theory of Action, the Priorities, and the accompanying Measurable Goals; this phase also includes engaging with internal and external stakeholders to ensure that the strategy is well-vetted and supported.

The Implementation Phase is the ongoing work of the superintendent and staff to delineate the Initiatives and Action Steps that the district will focus on each day to achieve the strategic plan.

Pre-work

Before launching an effort that will guide the district for the next several years, it is important to ensure that the appropriate people are involved and that there is an accurate and shared understanding of the district's current status.

1. Form a Steering Committee

DMC recommends that the district form a steering committee to lead the work of creating the strategic plan. The members of this committee should be expected to invest significant time

and effort into developing the plan. Also, the committee needs to function as a cohesive team that is seeking the best plan for the *entire* district, and not for a particular interest group. Committee membership needs to be broad enough to reflect the various interests of the district, but it is not meant to be a "representative" body with representation for every area. For example, the committee might have a secondary principal and an English teacher but not a math teacher; the expectation might be that the principal, having been a math teacher, can represent the strategic views of the math department. Finally, the committee needs to be able to work well together. By this, we do not mean that they will agree on everything. Our definition of working well together is that the committee be able to engage in constructive disagreements but also be able to arrive at a common understanding and decisions. Thus, thinking about the personalities and the potential behavioral roles that members can play is almost as important as the subject expertise that a person possesses.

DMC recommends a group size of approximately 10 to 12 members. This number is large enough to have significant representation, but small enough that it should be logistically possible to have full attendance at each meeting. Full engagement by every member of this committee is essential to the process.

2. Conduct Needs Assessment

A clear, accurate, and shared understanding of the current state of the district provides the foundation for a successful plan, and paves the way for a smoother planning process. With myriad opinions and theories on what the district could do differently, a common "fact base" grounded in rigorous research and analysis provides common understanding from which to launch the strategic planning process. There are three steps needed to conduct a needs assessment: (a) gather quantitative information, (b) obtain qualitative input, and (c) perform a root-cause analysis.

A. Gather Quantitative Information

As part of this analysis, the district should conduct a thorough review of data, including student academic performance, financial information, and operational performance such as teacher turnover data or survey answers. Ideally, districts should look at this information broken down by subgroups (e.g., by race, special education,

Exhibit 4 **DATA FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
– District demographics (students and teachers) – Student academic performance – Student behavior – College readiness – District finances	– Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders *Key questions to include:* • Things working well • Challenges requiring district attention • Initiatives for the district to invest in
Review multi-year trends. Compare to like districts and state. Analyze data across different ethnic and socio-economic student subgroups.	Generate list of areas for further exploration and fact checking.

Source: DMC

STRATEGIC PLANNING STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

An example from one district:

- Superintendent
- School board member
- Elementary school principal
- High school principal
- Teacher (President of the Teachers' Association)
- Director of Special Education
- Director of Teaching and Learning
- Program Supervisor, ELL Services
- Business Manager
- Head of Communications
- Parent

etc.) and over multiple years, looking for trends and outliers. In addition, it is important to calibrate as much of this data as possible through benchmarking. This helps to pinpoint areas in which the district may be excelling or to identify areas for particular focus.

B. Collect Qualitative Input
Stakeholder Engagement, Part I

The quantitative analysis should be integrated with qualitative data that provides valuable input from stakeholders (Exhibit 4). During the needs assessment phase, DMC's model recommends conducting interviews and convening focus groups with key stakeholders. The goal is to ensure that their perspectives and insights can inform the discussions from the very beginning.

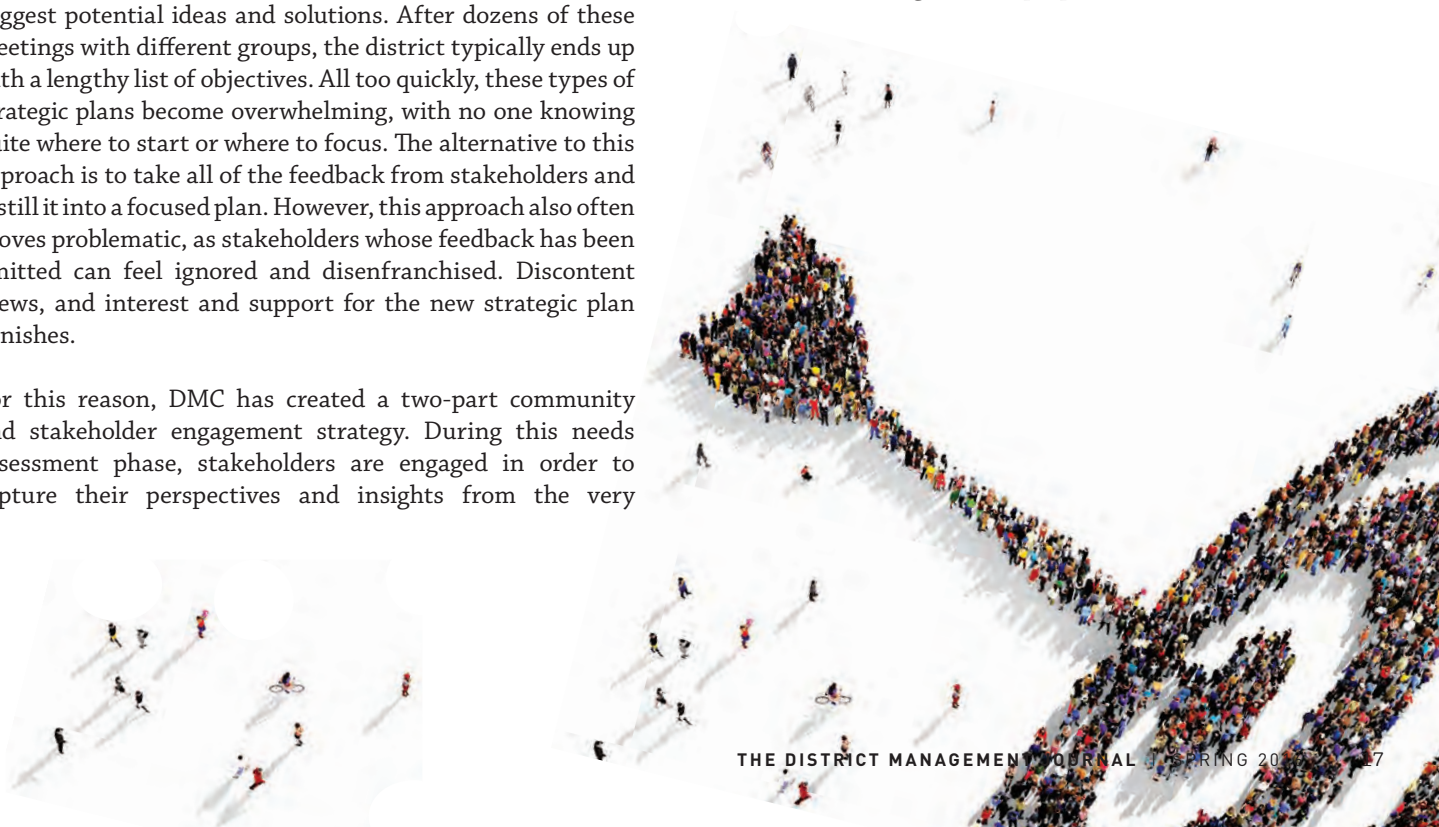
Drawing on years of experience, DMC has developed an approach to engaging internal and external stakeholders in the strategic planning process in a meaningful, productive manner. Successful strategic planning requires the input, vetting, and support of its stakeholders and its community. Indeed, in many communities, the school district is the largest budget line item for the town or city. Plans created in silos have limited potential for success, and yet, districts struggle to determine the most useful ways and the most appropriate junctures at which to engage stakeholders in the important work of contributing to the strategic plan. The most common approach is to engage groups at the very beginning of the process by holding a series of open meetings where stakeholders share their concerns and hopes as well as suggest potential ideas and solutions. After dozens of these meetings with different groups, the district typically ends up with a lengthy list of objectives. All too quickly, these types of strategic plans become overwhelming, with no one knowing quite where to start or where to focus. The alternative to this approach is to take all of the feedback from stakeholders and distill it into a focused plan. However, this approach also often proves problematic, as stakeholders whose feedback has been omitted can feel ignored and disenfranchised. Discontent brews, and interest and support for the new strategic plan vanishes.

For this reason, DMC has created a two-part community and stakeholder engagement strategy. During this needs assessment phase, stakeholders are engaged in order to capture their perspectives and insights from the very beginning. The second phase of the stakeholder engagement strategy commences once a draft strategic plan is in place, which we will discuss in greater detail later.

The committee needs to function as a cohesive team that is seeking the best plan for the *entire* district, and not for a particular interest group.

C. Perform a Root-Cause Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data highlight the "symptoms" and not the root cause of the issue at hand. Thus, it is important to work to identify the underlying causes. For example, in one district, the high school had a relatively high dropout rate despite considerable investments in support programs and interventions. By employing an iterative interrogative technique of the "5 Whys"—asking the question "Why?" repeatedly (five times or more)—DMC worked with the district to uncover the root cause of the problem. It was discovered that a significant proportion of students who



dropped out were getting "lost" in the district's one large comprehensive high school. When these students first started having trouble, they were moved to a small dropout-prevention program; however, once they started to do better, they were placed back in the high school and soon thereafter would drop out. With a root cause correctly identified, the district could work to address the problem. Unearthing these root causes is an essential step to identifying priority areas that may need additional focus, and will help in the process of drafting a powerful strategic plan.

Design

3. Draft the Strategic Plan

There are three key components to a well-designed strategic plan: the Theory of Action, Priorities, and Measurable Goals. These three components need to be aligned to work well together.

A. Develop a Theory of Action

A well-articulated Theory of Action reflects the district's core beliefs, provides a coherent guide for the work, and is easily understood by virtually all district stakeholders. Crafting a

Exhibit 5 **EXAMPLE OF A DISTRICT'S STRATEGIC PLAN ELEMENTS**

THEORY OF ACTION	**If resources are in the schools:** • School communities have autonomy over resources and programming for students, and • There is appropriate guidance, support, and accountability for results from the district office;	**Then school communities will make improved decisions based on school needs, and student achievement will increase.**
Priorities	**1.** The district will allocate resources efficiently, equitably, and transparently to schools. **2.** The district will focus on literacy, particularly in early grades, to build a strong foundation for academic success across all subject areas. **3.** The district will empower schools to utilize appropriate strategies to reduce the achievement gap.	**4.** The district will equip staff with knowledge and tools necessary to effectively engage with the families, partners, and community. **5.** The district will maintain a safe and respectful environment, and foster personal well-being and health among students and staff.

Examples of Measurable Goal, Initiative, and Action Steps associated with Priority #1

Measurable Goals	By 2020, 90% of school-based staff (principals and teachers) will indicate full knowledge of how resources are allocated among schools (in staff survey).
Initiatives	By November 2016, district will design a new methodology for allocating resources to schools, basing it on clear, consistent factors such as student needs, number of students, etc.
Action Steps	• Data dept.: conduct diagnostic to identify perceived inequities in current resource allocation system. To be completed by June 30, 2016. • Finance dept.: research resource allocation models in similar districts. To be completed by May 2016.

clear Theory of Action is challenging work; it requires various parts of the organization to come together to engage in authentic and courageous discussions about the core beliefs of the district, what is working well, what needs to change, and how the district intends to achieve its long-term vision and mission. In other words, the district must think deeply about the context needed to successfully address the root causes of the district's issues.

As a helpful illustration, we will use the strategic plan outlined in Exhibit 5 as an example for each step in the process. This district's Theory of Action is based on their belief that building leaders should be given a significant amount of decision-making authority over resources and programming combined with some guidance from the central office. (This approach, often referred to as "bounded or guided autonomy," would contrast with a TOA based on the belief that a district's central office must directly control instruction in order to increase student achievement.) DMC worked with this district to arrive at their TOA through a series of intense discussions taking into account the history, the context, and the goals of this school system. Initially, members of the strategic planning steering committee held a wider-ranging set of opinions and feelings about how much autonomy school leaders should be afforded, and whether it should be earned or given. In the end, given the fast-changing demographics and student needs of parts of the district, the steering committee felt that the system could not serve all students well without school leaders being able to exercise a greater level of decision making. Still, given the history of the district, the committee also decided that the central office needed to guide and bound some of the individual decisions about resource allocation.

B. Define District Priorities

Once the TOA is articulated, the next step in the process is to determine Priorities, a short list (five or six items) of broad thematic areas of focus that will propel the district to achieving its vision and mission. Using the example in Exhibit 5, this district initially identified four Priorities. The four Priorities included their efforts to allocate resources to schools, but also included academic priorities focused on early literacy and addressing the different achievement gaps—e.g., between white and Black students as well as among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. They also wanted to strengthen the school's and staff's ability to increase engagement with their community. It should be noted that identifying early literacy as a Priority does not mean math is unimportant; rather, this Priority signifies that the district will pay special attention to literacy. Taken together with the TOA, this Priority says that school leaders can determine how best to serve their communities, but the district will be providing guidance to focus on early literacy.

Combining lagging metrics with leading metrics to track performance allows for intermediate course correction.

One of the common challenges with this step in the process is to get down to a short list of priorities from the lengthy number of items that a district may want to pursue. Often a district will have a laundry list of priorities that reflect the varied opinions and perceptions of the steering team members charged with drafting the plan. The committee needs to work together to rise above their ideological differences or, at the very least, to appreciate those differences, and then move on to select the handful of Priorities that align with the Theory of Action in order to help the district achieve its vision.

C. Identify Measurable Goals

With the Priorities now fully identified, the strategic planning committee must also develop Measurable Goals aligned with each Priority following the SMART paradigm (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ggressive yet **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound). Establishing Measurable Goals at the outset is fundamental to the long-term success of any district's strategic plan. Given the large amount of data that is typically available in districts, DMC has developed a few guidelines that have eased the process of setting Measurable Goals:

- **Include both lagging and leading measures.** Lagging metrics look back and tell us how things have been in the past, e.g. four-year graduation rates, whereas leading metrics are predictive. Combining lagging metrics

Having a draft plan to share with stakeholders helps to ground the discussion and allows for thoughtful, insightful feedback.

with leading metrics to track performance allows for intermediate course correction. For instance, the number of students who fail Algebra 1 in grade 8 is a leading indicator of how graduation rates may look for the cohort, all things remaining equal. Therefore, tracking this indicator would prompt the district to take action before it is too late.

- **Minimize measures that track processes.** Completion of tasks does not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. For instance, designing and implementing a new resource allocation methodology by a certain date in itself will not lead to better performance. Thus, in the example given in Exhibit 5, the district set a more specific goal to have at least 90% of the staff be knowledgeable and confident in using the new resource allocation methodology by 2020.
- **Create several layers of Measurable Goals.** It is a good idea to create different layers of goals to be used by different stakeholders. For example, a set of measures can be designed to be shared with the broad public, other sets can be created for use by the board as part of a district "scorecard" (these are Measurable Goals drafted as part of the strategic plan), and still many other measurable goals will be used by members of the district in handling day-to-day operations. For the strategic plan, DMC believes that two or three key Measurable Goals are sufficient to measure progress for each Priority. An excessive number of Measurable Goals not only creates logistical challenges but may transmit inconsistent signals about the district's progress. District staff will certainly have many more data points that are being used every day to chart progress.

4. Engage with Stakeholders
Stakeholder Engagement, Part II

Before finalizing the strategic plan and moving into implementation, the district must engage various internal and external stakeholders again and seek their input and feedback to ensure that the plan reflects the wider community's aspirations for the future.

A series of facilitated meetings with the various stakeholders (e.g., all principals, broader groups of teachers, noninstructional staff, parents, etc.) and community members, including community leaders, business owners, foundation heads, and residents without children in the system, should be held. Having a draft plan to share with stakeholders helps to ground the discussion and allows for thoughtful, insightful feedback. These meetings provide essential insight into different perspectives, can highlight details that may have been overlooked, and offer an opportunity for feedback and reaction.

This engagement process also helps to create broader understanding and buy-in. Hearing various reactions to the plan can help build some understanding among stakeholders and cultivate an appreciation for the complexities at hand. While it may not create consensus, the engagement process creates a deeper understanding of the needs of the district and some sense of the tradeoffs that the district often needs to make.

Here is an example of how community feedback worked to augment the original draft of a strategic plan. Having gone through the design phase with DMC, the district described in Exhibit 5 articulated four strategic Priorities which it presented to the community for feedback. During the stakeholder feedback phase, school safety and student health came up frequently as areas that the district should prioritize. Recent incidents of gun-related violence in schools nationwide and the increased incidence of childhood obesity were issues at the forefront of people's minds. This specific and thoughtful feedback from the community sparked reflection, and in the end, a fifth priority was added: "The district will maintain a safe and respectful environment, and foster personal well-being and health among students and staff."

At this point in the process, the school board should move to approve and adopt the plan. With the public portion of the strategic planning process complete, the critical work of developing concrete steps to put the strategic plan in action must begin.

The Implementation Plan

During this phase of the strategic planning process, the district needs to define the actions that need to take place, by what date, and by whom. This step is as important as the drafting of the plan itself. DMC believes that the implementation plan should be developed by more stakeholders than just the members of the steering committee; the group should be broadened to include many of those who will be charged with executing the plan.

5. Define Initiatives

The first step in this phase is to determine Initiatives, which are the specific projects related to each Priority. How many Initiatives should be included in the strategic plan? DMC was recently at a meeting of all 18 principals from a 15,000-student, K-12 district in Pennsylvania to discuss strategic planning. We started the meeting by asking two questions:

- How many major initiatives are you working on this year?
- How many major initiatives can you do well in any given year?

You can guess the reaction. There were a lot of chuckles and guffaws when we asked the first question. It is not unusual for principals to shout out "15," "25," or even "Who knows?" The reaction is virtually the same in every district—no one really knows how many major initiatives are underway, and whatever the number is, it is too many. Once the chuckles and sidelong glances subsided, we asked the second question. This time, we asked them to raise their hand for the number of initiatives that they can do well in any given year. We started with 18 hands in the air for tackling one initiative a year, but as we counted to two and then to three, most hands went down. One principal kept her hand up until "five" in this instance, but we have never had anyone in any district say they could tackle more than five well. DMC consistently finds that school districts are pursuing far too many projects, and thus not doing most of them well. Thus, like the process for determining Priorities, DMC's process of defining Initiatives also involves creating a short list of high-impact work. Determining these high-impact Initiatives involves three steps:

DMC consistently finds that school districts are pursuing far too many projects, and thus not doing most of them well.

- **Create a list of current school-system Initiatives:** The "out with the old and in with the new" approach or the layering of additional programs on top of existing programs is ineffective. The best approach is to leverage and build upon the work already being done in the district and to create a coherent and aligned approach to moving the work forward. Districts should begin by taking the time to take stock of existing initiatives.

Drafting a strategic plan is not a "one and done" deal. A strategic plan needs to be a dynamic document that reflects the changing needs of the district.

- **Perform a gap analysis to identify future Initiatives:** Once the existing Initiatives are aggregated, they need to be assessed in terms of their effectiveness and their alignment with the strategic plan. This process will expose gaps where additional Initiatives may be needed to achieve the strategic objectives.
- **Finalize a set of Initiatives aligned with Priorities:** New Initiatives will then be formulated to address identified gaps. The final list of Initiatives is a combination of existing and newly formulated ones.

To return to the example in Exhibit 5, one of the key Initiatives developed by this district was the following: "By November 2016, the district will design a new resource allocation methodology for schools, basing it on clear, consistent factors such as student needs, number of students, etc." This example illustrates its alignment with the TOA and the Priorities; in addition, it is specific about what needs to be accomplished and sets a specific timeframe to accomplish an important step in the strategic plan.

6. Identify Action Steps

For successful execution, each Initiative needs to have associated Action Steps that explain the following:

- What will occur, i.e. specific tasks that need to be performed
- How much, how often, or to what extent these actions will occur
- Who will carry out these tasks, including identifying specific school or central office staff members
- Which individuals will be required to provide feedback on interim work products, and who else will need to be informed as part of the process
- When will these actions take place and for how long
- What are the key milestones to achieve as part of the process
- What resources (if any) are needed to carry out the proposed tasks

Action Steps provide the details of what must occur, align all stakeholders in a common process, and enable all involved to think in a structured manner about the future of the work. In our district example in Exhibit 5, the Data and Finance departments' Action Steps are as follows: (1) Data Department: conduct diagnostic to identify perceived inequities in current resource allocation system, to be completed by June 30, 2016; (2) Finance Department: research resource allocation models in similar districts, to be completed by May 2016.

By breaking down the overall strategy to this level of detail, the performance-monitoring system provides opportunities for mutual support, transparency about the progress made, and an accountability mechanism.

7. Manage and Report on Progress of Implementation

The success of a strategy is rarely defined by the strategy itself, but by the success in implementation; and, of course, successful implementation should result in improved outcomes. Follow-through on a strategic plan requires detailed planning and communication, analytics to track progress, and cultivation of leadership capacity at various levels of the organization. The implementation monitoring must be tailored to the needs of the district and take into account the strengths, weaknesses, and funding available. This sharpening of the link between tangible daily work and the overarching strategy gives stakeholders a holistic view that can enhance their motivation and understanding of the big picture. Very tangibly, implementation monitoring consists of the following:

- **Set up a monitoring system to regularly measure progress:** Districts should invest in a process—whether technology-aided dashboards or a simple Excel spreadsheet—to document and track progress on where the district stands vis à vis the defined action plans. The

monitoring system should include the baseline level of performance for each measurable goal, the desired level of performance, the timeframe, and the people with primary responsibility for achieving success.

- **Make time to review progress-monitoring information:** Key leadership staff must commit to monitoring progress on a regular basis and take appropriate steps if the data warrants. This involves a regular cadence of meetings (e.g., monthly) among the leadership team to review progress data. The board should also play a role in progress monitoring. This may involve reviewing the district's progress on the defined Measurable Goals quarterly or, at minimum, twice a year.
- **Assign specific individual(s) to gather and interpret data, track progress, keep teams informed, ensure that timely Action Steps are occurring, and adjust actions when necessary:** To ensure that the periodic progress-monitoring meetings are most effective, it is essential to charge one person with the responsibility of interpreting information from the monitoring tools. This individual will not just be a data aggregator but will also be responsible for identifying early warning signs, investigating performance issues with district teams, brainstorming steps for remediating situations where adequate progress has not occurred, and presenting this information to the leadership team for review and feedback. Upon receiving leadership feedback, this individual will then follow up with district teams under the leadership team's directive. The person in this role therefore needs a mix of project management and leadership skills, and is ultimately responsible for the successful, on-time and on-budget implementation of the strategic plan.

Conclusion

With districts confronting myriad challenges, competing priorities, and increasing student needs, the importance of a focused, cohesive, results-oriented district-wide strategic plan is greater than ever before.

Strategic planning is not an exercise in coming up with "out of the box" ideas; nor is it a required exercise to satisfy the school board and stakeholders. A district's strategic plan needs to articulate priorities, initiatives, and actions that will achieve the district's long-term vision while also ensuring the most effective allocation of the district's resources. A simple, clear, and coherent strategic plan is most powerful in guiding action throughout the district. Professor of management Donald Sull states, "For a strategy to influence action, it must be remembered. To be remembered, it must be understood. And to be understood, it must be simple. Keeping the complex simple (as opposed to simplistic!) is the key to the art of successful strategy."[3]

Finally, drafting a strategic plan is not a "one and done" deal. A strategic plan needs to be a dynamic document that reflects the changing needs of the district. Effective strategic plan implementation requires periodic and honest assessments, and appropriate adjustments to the plan as needed. As the district environment and context change, the district should alter Priorities, Measurable Goals, Initiatives, and Action Steps to meet their new needs.

Your strategic plan needs to be up to the challenges of today. ◆

NOTES

1. Nanang Bayuk, "Historical Background of Strategic Planning," *Business* blog post (September 7, 2012), http://culturalclassics.blogspot.com/2012/09/historical-background-of-strategic.html.
2. Ryszard Barnat, "Strategic Management: Formulation and Implementation," *24xls.com* (2014), http://www.introduction-to-management.24xls.com/en316.
3. Stated by Donald Sull, professor at London Business School, while discussing successful business strategy in *Simplify Your Strategy,* a video from Harvard Business Review

10 Mistakes to Avoid

Developing a Strategic Plan for Today's Challenges

Virtually all districts have a strategic plan, but does your district have a focused plan that guides your day-to-day activities? These 10 lessons may help guide the way.

1 DON'T START WITHOUT FIRST GAINING A CLEAR, FACT-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISTRICT'S CURRENT STATE.

With myriad opinions and theories on what could be done differently, the district must begin the planning process with an objective fact-based understanding of the district's strengths and challenges. This includes not only an in-depth quantitative analysis but gathering qualitative perceptions and benchmarking data.

2 DON'T DRAFT A PLAN THAT SKIMS THE SURFACE; ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES.

When examining the district's performance, go beyond discussing the symptoms and, instead, push to identify the root causes using the 5 Whys. A strategic plan that works to address underlying issues will lead to success; otherwise, your strategic plan could be directing effort to the wrong areas.

3 DON'T SHORTCHANGE DEVELOPING A COGENT THEORY OF ACTION.

A well-articulated Theory of Action reflects the district's core beliefs and is a framework within which all of the district's Priorities, Initiatives, and Action Steps align. The strongest theories of action are focused, easily understood by virtually all district stakeholders, and guide critical tasks and workflows, organizational arrangement, and culture in the district.

4 DON'T TREAT EVERY IDEA AS A GOOD IDEA; DEVELOP A SHORT LIST OF HIGH-IMPACT PRIORITIES.

Creating a long list of Priorities is easy, but identifying a small set (less than five) of the most important levers for improving performance will help drive results. Manage expectations that not all ideas may find their place in the final plan. Establish a process for how final decisions will be made.

5 DON'T FORGET TO INCLUDE SPECIFIC MEASURABLE ACTION PLANS.

While defining high-level vision and Priorities is important, a strategic plan should specify Initiatives and Action Steps that the district will undertake. The strongest action plans detail the roles and responsibilities of various school and central office personnel, establish key milestones, and address any budget shifts that may be necessary.

6 DON'T FORGET TO INCLUDE MANY PARTS OF THE ORGANIZATION, NOT JUST ACADEMICS.

While the ultimate goals of the strategic plan are likely focused on student achievement, other departments, such as finance, human resources, and operations, are essential to achieving the district's mission. The strategic plan should articulate specific actions for these areas to align the district's work.

7 DON'T JUST ENGAGE IN OPEN-ENDED DISCUSSIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS; SEEK ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK.

Stakeholders and community members can most effectively provide meaningful, actionable feedback and input once an initial draft of the plan is in place. DMC has found that this approach is far more effective than open-ended discussions about their concerns and hopes for the district.

8 DON'T FORGET TO INCLUDE LAGGING AND LEADING METRICS TO TRACK PROGRESS.

Both leading (input-oriented) and lagging (output-oriented) metrics should be tracked to measure progress and inform action. While external-facing scorecards may largely consist of lagging indicators, leading measures can be tracked internally to allow for timely course correction when needed.

9 DON'T JUST LAYER NEW INITIATIVES ON TOP OF EXISTING ONES.

Strategic planning should not be about layering in more Initiatives. Seek to leverage and build upon the work being done in the district and create a coherent and aligned approach to moving the work forward.

10 DON'T FORGET TO ESTABLISH CLEAR IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING PROCESSES.

Effective implementation requires detailed planning and communication, cultivation of leadership capacity, and the analytics to monitor progress. The implementation plan and monitoring processes must also be tailored to the district's strengths, weaknesses, and available resources.

DMC **Manager's Toolkit**

Is your strategic plan up to today's challenges?

While virtually all districts have a strategic plan, some strategic plans provide a clear vision and detailed objectives that drive action throughout the district on a day-to-day basis. Other strategic plans, by contrast, are well-crafted documents that sit on the shelf.

Rate your performance

25 and over: Congratulations! You have a stellar strategic plan

16 to 24: You are well on your way to having a strong strategic plan

8 to 15: With a little more effort, the strategic plan can be made more powerful

7 or below: The strategic plan may need more refinement

Take the following test and see how your strategic plan rates.

QUESTIONS		RATE YOUR RESPONSE
The strategic plan should serve as a useful guiding document that determines district operations on a consistent basis. *How often do you use it in your leadership meetings?*	**5** = Every week **4** = Regularly **3** = Quarterly **2** = Occasionally **1** = Almost never	
Does your plan articulate a short list of priorities (ideally fewer than 5)?	**5** = Fewer than 6 priorities **4** = Fewer than 10 priorities **3** = More than 10 **2** = More than 15 **1** = More than I can remember	
Does the plan articulate goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART)?	**5** = Yes, definitely **4** = Goals may not meet all these criteria, but are well-defined **3** = Goals are somewhat defined **2** = Goals are not very clear **1** = Goals are not defined in any of these ways	
Does the plan include specific actions/ priorities for district functions besides academics, e.g. finance, operations, human capital, etc.?	**5** = Every function understands their role in realizing the strategic plan **4** = Most functions are included in the strategic plan **3** = Some functions are included **2** = Few functions are included **1** = Specific actions are not defined, except in academics	
Is there a balance of both leading (predictive) and lagging (backwards-looking) measures in defining SMART goals?	**5** = Yes, definitely **4** = Both types of measures are tracked to some degree **3** = Few leading measures are used **2** = Only lagging measures are used **1** = Don't know	
Has there been an articulation of how implementation will be handled? In other words, do you have specific departments, people, and tasks identified?	**5** = Yes, everything is clearly defined **4** = Many departments have clear definition **3** = Some tasks are defined **2** = Very little is defined **1** = Nothing is specified	
	TOTAL	

Focus and Persistence Change the Course:

Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

Diane Ullman and Sam Ribnick

Once known as "The City That Lit the World," New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the epicenter of the U.S. whaling industry in the mid-1800s, providing the whale oil that was the prime energy source for oil lanterns. At that time, New Bedford was one of the wealthiest cities in the world, an era captured by Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick,* in which Captain Ahab launches his journey from the port of New Bedford.

In recent times, New Bedford has lost much of its former glory. It is now one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts, as many of its industries have declined or moved away. The 2008 recession hit New Bedford particularly hard, and its unemployment rate continues to be twice the statewide average, with nearly one in three residents living in poverty. While New Bedford has long been a welcoming port for immigrants, with nearly half of its residents tracing their origins to Portugal or to Portuguese territories due to a large wave of immigration in the late 1800s, more recent immigration from Puerto Rico and Cape Verde has left New Bedford grappling with challenges many cities face with increasing diversity and a disadvantaged economy.

The city's challenges are reflected in New Bedford's public school system. New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) has been a struggling district for more than a decade, and poverty and shifting demographics have created mounting challenges for the school system. Many of the district's schools have been ranked in the lowest tiers of the state's accountability system, and have been through turnaround processes for several years. Despite a massive influx of resources from the state, there had been little progress to show. Waves of leaders, both internal and external, tried to reinvent the school system and failed; four superintendents had come and gone in six years. In May 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), stating that the schools "struggle with student attendance, discipline, graduation, and retention," made the decision to designate the district as Level 4, "underperforming." DESE nearly decided to designate one of the elementary schools as Level 5, "chronically underperforming"; had this occurred, the entire district would have been subject to state takeover.

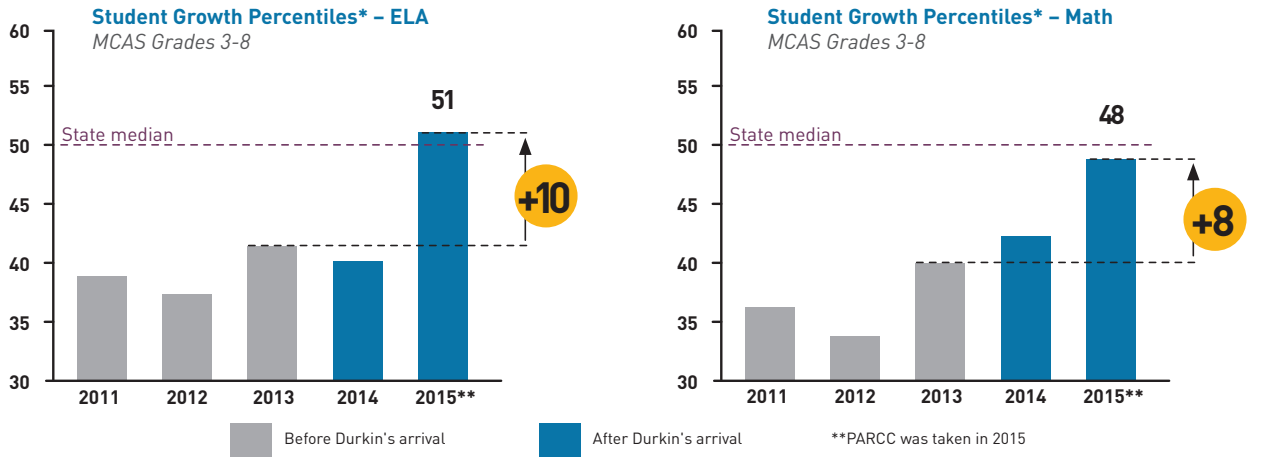
NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS FAST FACTS

Incorporated:	Population:	Median household income:		Unemployment rate	Key industries:
1787	**95,078** Down from **121,000** at peak in **1920**	**$33,098** compared to **$66,768** for MA^	**29.2%** Below poverty line	**10%** compared to **5.6%** for MA^^	**Healthcare Construction Education Manufacturing**

^As of 2013

^^As of 2014

Exhibit 1 **DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT AT NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS (MA)**



*Student Growth Percentile is a percentile ranking of student growth relative to peers starting at the same point. Median for the state is 50.

**Note: The state used statistical methods to calibrate PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) scores to MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) scores, since only half of the state transitioned to PARCC in 2015.

Source: DESE. http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/general.aspx?topNavId=1&orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&

It was in this context that Dr. Pia Durkin became the superintendent of NBPS in summer 2013 to lead a turnaround. Over the past two and a half years, much bold work has been done. Clear focus, strong leadership, and a relentless commitment to building team capacity and focusing on high-quality instruction are changing the course. In spring 2015, New Bedford's students demonstrated a dramatic improvement in achievement. Even with the new, more rigorous Common Core–aligned PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) test, student growth scores jumped by 10 points or more in many grades, exceeding the majority of urban districts and reaching the state average for growth (Exhibit 1). Proficiency levels climbed to their highest point in years.

While a great deal of work remains, the dramatic improvement in student results is a tangible sign that this turnaround is different. Teachers, principals, and families are now cautiously optimistic that the New Bedford Public Schools is headed in the right direction. Rather than taking a "silver bullet" approach, Durkin tackled issues pertaining to people resources, culture, structure, systems, and alignment of the district's efforts. Focus and persistent effort are changing the course for the district, and there is now a renewed sense of hope for the schools of New Bedford.

Challenges on Multiple Fronts

When the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) made the decision in May 2011 to designate New Bedford Public Schools a Level 4 district, the decision reflected student performance and high school graduation rates in the bottom 4% of the state. Fewer than half of the students in the district were scoring proficient on Massachusetts's state test, the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). The high school of 2,700 students had a graduation rate of just 53.5%, with an incoming freshman class of 800 students that dwindled to just 500 by the end of 10th grade. Furthermore, the state found that "[graduation] rates are worsening and there is little evidence that the district is addressing them effectively."

NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS **FAST FACTS**

12,681 students:
- **11.3%** African American
- **0.9%** Asian
- **36.5%** Hispanic
- **0.5%** Native American
- **44.8%** White
- **0.2%** Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
- **0.5%** Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic

Graduation rate: **60.4%†**

Per student spending: **$12,792††**

Schools: **25†††**

†Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate ††2014 †††26 until 2015-16, when two schools were combined

Durkin recalls being asked by multiple people, "Do you really think New Bedford can get better?"

DESE was particularly focused on John A. Parker Elementary, not only because of the school's low academic results, but also because of the district's seeming inability to improve the school. DESE nearly decided to designate Parker Elementary School as Level 5.

When Pia Durkin assumed the superintendency of NBPS in summer 2013, she knew the stakes were high. During her first few weeks, Durkin recalls being asked by multiple people, "Do you really think New Bedford can get better?" It was clear to her that staff, parents, and the community were demoralized, and that they were expecting yet another failed turnaround effort.

To Durkin, the need for change was apparent everywhere she looked; she recalls that she "continued to uncover issues and problems that had been in existence for years." Financial resources were scarce: the district's budget had been at the minimum spending level allowed by state law year after year, and just before her arrival, a budget deficit of $3 million was revealed, leading to layoffs and questions about solvency. The state's report had indicated that "the processes of curriculum development and revision are not being well managed." Indeed, Durkin noted, "Central administration had largely disconnected itself from the work in the schools. Principals fended for themselves, operating as separate entities except where personal relationships thrived, allowing for random support largely focused on operational concerns, rather than instructional challenges." Durkin learned that the reading program had not been updated for 11 years and mathematics textbooks were equally outdated. The district identified only 300 students as English Language Learners (ELL) despite more than 3,000 Hispanic students and a large immigrant population. Staffing issues abounded: the office of personnel was being managed by a head clerk reliant on yellow cards that served as employee records; the business manager had resigned, and two experienced retirees were working in an interim capacity to manage the district's finances; and a new facilities manager had just been hired into a position that had been left vacant for several years in a district with many buildings over 90 years old. Perhaps most disturbing to Durkin was the realization that despite the poor academic performance, the district's elementary schools released students early every Friday due to a 1975 agreement with the union to allow teachers to have contractual planning time.

Developing a Comprehensive and Coherent Approach

Durkin immediately began work on creating an Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) in conjunction with the District Management Council (DMC), the plan manager brought in by DESE. A plan manager is provided by DESE to any district named Level 4 on the theory that chronically low-performing districts need an initial boost of external support to effectively plan and execute a turnaround. DMC had in fact worked as plan manager since NBPS was first designated Level 4; while a strong plan had been developed at that time, little follow-through had occurred. Durkin and DMC immediately set about codifying the district's theory of action and strategy,

Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools

2011
Parker Elementary and Hayden/McFadden Elementary designated Level 4 by DESE

2011
NBPS district designated Level 4

2013 July
Dr. Pia Durkin starts as superintendent

2013 December
Parker Elementary named Level 5, New Bedford High School named Level 4

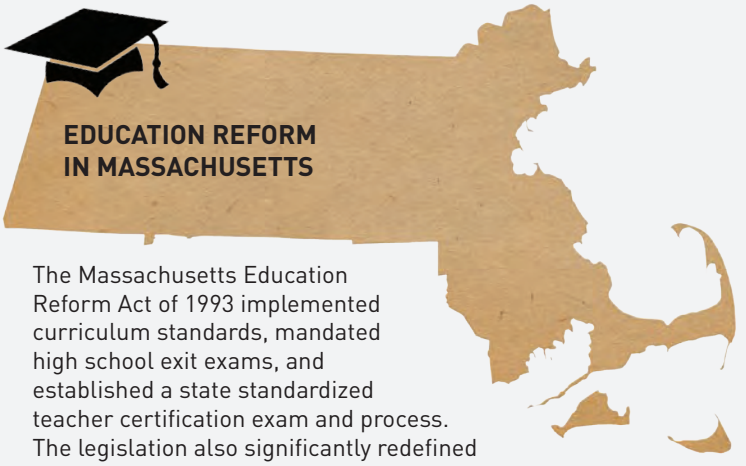
2014 January
New Bedford Educators Association attempts no confidence vote, which does not pass

shaped by Durkin's intense focus on instruction (Exhibit 2). DMC then helped Durkin translate that strategy into an AIP by delineating the steps for turnaround and establishing clear, ambitious goals for all staff. Though many components of the plan had not changed from the district's previous AIPs, Durkin's theory of action brought the steps into coherence around a singular focus on instruction.

One month into her new role as superintendent, Durkin shared the Accelerated Improvement Plan and the theory of action at a convocation event. She introduced an ambitious quantifiable goal for the district: to reduce the number of students not proficient by 40% or more, in every grade at every school. This goal made it clear to all staff that high expectations must apply to every single student, and that expectations for staff would be high as well. This unambiguous, measurable goal represented a major culture shock.

Effective Strategy Requires Effective Leaders

Durkin realized that the implementation of this comprehensive plan would be dependent on the effectiveness of her leadership team in the central office and her leadership in each of the buildings. However, she was not sure her central office had the capability or the willingness to make the tough calls and do the intense work needed for a turnaround. When Durkin brought together the central office leadership team to distribute responsibilities for implementing the AIP, long-tenured district leaders nodded in agreement; yet, Durkin soon saw important initiatives fall behind as district leaders failed to take action. For example, the district's plan specifically called for introducing common formative assessments, but the leader assigned to



EDUCATION REFORM IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 implemented curriculum standards, mandated high school exit exams, and established a state standardized teacher certification exam and process. The legislation also significantly redefined the role of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), facilitating a move from ensuring local compliance to supporting accountability, equity, and leadership.

In January 2010, the state legislature further expanded the role of DESE with the passage of An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, which gave the state considerably more power to intervene in low-performing districts and schools. Specifically, this act gave the Commissioner the capacity to conduct reviews and designate schools within a district as "underperforming" (Level 4) and "chronically underperforming" (Level 5). Based on student performance data and improvements in student academic performance over time, up to 4% of the total number of Massachusetts public schools could be designated as Level 4 or 5. Moreover, the act obligated the district superintendents with schools designated as Level 4 or 5 to work with the Commissioner to develop and enact an appropriate turnaround plan for these schools.

The act also defined criteria for designating an entire school district as "chronically underperforming" and made it possible for the state to intervene at a district level. To be designated as Level 5 or "chronically underperforming," a district must be among the state's 20 lowest-performing school districts as determined by MCAS measurements over a four-year period and a district review conducted by the Center for School and District Accountability. If a district is designated Level 5, the Commissioner and the board have the unprecedented authority to appoint either a receiver or a nonprofit organization to take over the responsibilities of the Level 5 district's superintendent and elected school committee.

2014 May
New Bedford Educators Association passes a no confidence resolution and calls for the Superintendent's resignation. Durkin says she "absolutely" will not resign

2014 June
School committee approves expanded budget with updated reading program

2014 July
Jason DeFalco brought in as chief academic officer

2015 March
Durkin and New Bedford Educators Association president announce breakthrough negotiation to provide additional 20 hours of professional development and earlier hiring timeline

2015 November
State releases NBPS results on 2015 PARCC showing higher achievement and large Growth Score gains

Durkin introduced an ambitious quantifiable goal for the district: to reduce the number of students not proficient by 40% or more, in every grade at every school.

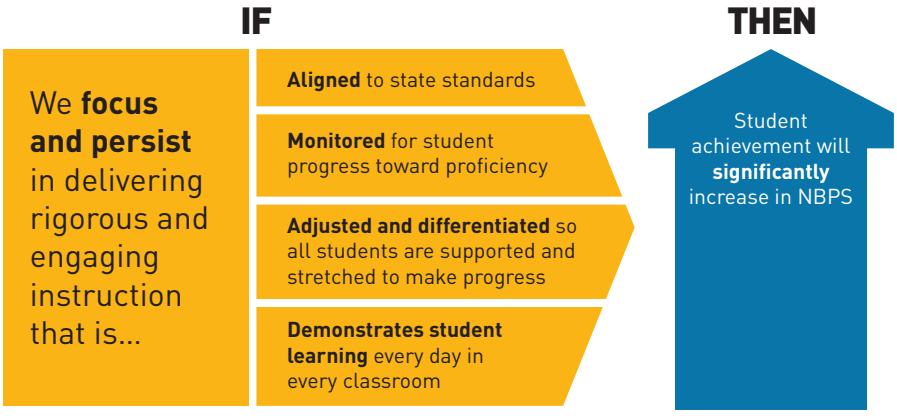
that initiative continuously prioritized other so-called urgent tasks above the development of the assessments, and so the district was unable to measure student growth for the first quarter of the year. Another central office leader who was trusted with the principal hiring process used it as an opportunity to push forward candidates with personal ties above higher-quality candidates, an affront to Durkin's attempt to redefine how the district selected talent.

By early 2014, Durkin had removed a handful of central office leaders from their positions and had begun to set clear expectations for the performance of those who remained. She put the two assistant superintendents on notice, helped the curriculum director find a job in another district, and removed the data and assessment manager. As changes in central office leadership were underway, Durkin also turned her attention to school leadership.

Durkin's approach included a heavy presence in the schools. Being in schools on a daily basis, observing teaching, and discussing teacher and student performance with principals gave her first-hand knowledge of each principal's capabilities. "School leaders were unaware of the serious lack of achievement in their schools," Durkin found on arrival. "Though data was shared, the central administration had limited the accessibility and use of data to the point where individual schools did not know how they fared or how they compared to each other, to the district as a whole, or to the state average. There was a sense that the district administration did not want schools 'to feel bad' by seeing how they compared to each other."

As the 2013-14 school year progressed, it became apparent that the need for capacity building would be far greater than Durkin had realized. She and DMC arrived at a two-pronged approach: (1) to keep the improvement plan on track in the near-term, DMC agreed to provide the needed capacity, taking on tasks and assignments that should be handled by district staff; (2) simultaneously, DMC would work with the district to build capacity for the long term. Durkin and DMC began conducting a thorough skill and will assessment of all central office leaders and principals in the district. Those who had both skill and will were encouraged to become part of the district's emerging and informal leadership coalition; those who lacked skill but had potential were put on improvement plans; those who lacked both skill and will left the district either as an outcome of the evaluation process or through resignation. By the end of Durkin's first year, nearly half of the 26 schools had leadership changes underway.

Exhibit 2 **THEORY OF ACTION: NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



Source: New Bedford Public Schools

To meet the leadership need, the district stepped up its efforts to find additional leaders, looking both internally and externally for those who had not only the skill set, but also the appetite for turnaround work. Durkin took heat at times for selecting candidates from outside the district, and was often under political pressure to select an internal candidate, but armed with what she had seen in the schools, she did not waver from selecting the candidates she knew would be the best fit for this challenging work.

Changing the Culture

Years of leadership turnover and chronic underperformance had left NBPS with a deeply ingrained culture that prioritized adult needs over those of students and communities. Durkin realized that deep culture change was going to take more than turning over a few leaders and principals; it would take a systemic review and change of incentives, systems, and structures to change not only observable behavior but also beliefs and mindset. "Leadership capacity had to be assessed at the district level and in the schools, and difficult conversations had to take place," Durkin said.

To drive culture change, Durkin worked with DMC to introduce tools and systems to focus leaders and teachers on the ambitious goal of reducing the number of students deemed not proficient by 40%. The tools and systems were put in place to provide supports as well as to promote accountability. Data tools were developed to show teachers the depth of student need, to show principals the gaps in instruction, and to show the central office how much more they could be doing to support schools. DMC also helped the district create a "rigor rubric," an easy-to-use tool that helped schools focus on three crucial elements of rigorous instruction: using content at grade level, student engagement, and teachers promoting persistence. The rigor rubric, together with examples for each content area and grade level, helped raise and align staff expectations for what students should be able to do. For the first time, teachers and principals had common expectations for instruction, which created a foundation for feedback, coaching, and professional development.

To encourage principals to spend their time on instructional responsibilities, DMC helped the district set weekly goals for number of observations, time spent in data meetings, and coaching conversations. DMC created a tool to enable detailed principal monitoring and evaluation processes. Durkin modeled the change, and spent as much time as she could visiting schools and observing instruction, making it to all 26 schools at least once before Thanksgiving, and to some schools many more times than that. For the principals or central office leaders who were slow to make the change and spend more time in classrooms, Durkin presented the data collected through DMC's monitoring system and explicitly let them know by December that their jobs were at risk if they did not make the shift to focusing on instruction.

There was a sense that the district administration did not want schools 'to feel bad' by seeing how they compared to each other.

Durkin made clear that improving the quality of instruction was the top priority for all staff. For teachers, the district introduced data teams and a process for looking at data on student outcomes and growth. This process was implemented despite initial pushback from central office leaders and principals that it would make staff "feel bad" to compare data across schools and among teachers within a school. Some teachers protested being held accountable for their students' learning data, implying that it was not fair or right to hold all students to high standards. Durkin held firm on the 40% goal.

Durkin simultaneously deepened her efforts to rebuild the central office with a school-centered approach. When it came time to build the budget, she found a process in shambles; simply submitting a budget on time had been a challenge in years past. Working with the business manager, Durkin and central office leaders created a budget that reflected the district strategy for improvement. Durkin also brought in a new ELL director to build a functional system for identifying and registering ELL students for the first time. The existing

By the end of Durkin's first year, nearly half of the 26 schools had leadership changes underway.

systems had been so ineffective that only a fraction of ELL students in the district had been properly identified, and many had incorrectly been given an IEP for nonexistent disabilities. After a tremendous effort, the district initiated a thorough screening process, resulting in nearly 2,200 students now identified for ELL services, compared to 300 before.

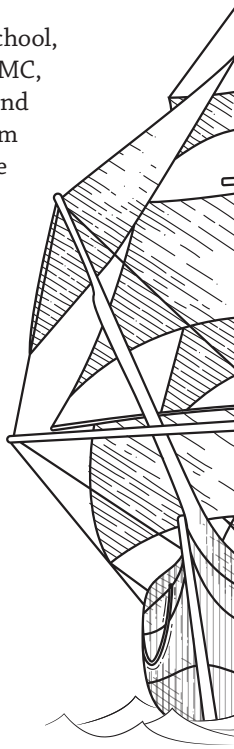
Armed with a survey of district-wide staff showing that the majority reported poor customer service and support from the central office, Durkin let it be known that district leaders must reinvent themselves. One gesture that sent a particularly strong message was Durkin's overhaul of parking assignments at the central office: she did away with nearly all assigned spots. Durkin also took on the staff's pervasive practice of arriving late and leaving early and eliminated a number of special arrangements that permitted some staff to work a shortened week or alternative daily schedule. The clear message was, "We are here to serve our schools and our families."

Through the challenging first year, Durkin learned that while district culture needed to change and could change, achieving change would require more than a written plan and symbolic speeches. Developing a comprehensive set of systems that changed the way the district measured performance, keeping the focus on what was important, and reinforcing a culture of shared accountability led to the beginnings of true culture change.

Winning Support from the Community in the Face of "No Confidence"

Durkin had been superintendent for less than six months and was just beginning to put her comprehensive turnaround plan into action when DESE announced the decision to move Parker Elementary from Level 4 status to Level 5 and to move New Bedford High School from Level 3 status to Level 4. Rather than using Level 5 status to take control away from the district, as had been typical with other Level 5 schools, the state commissioner took the unprecedented step of naming Durkin the receiver for Parker Elementary School's Level 5 turnaround. While this was a show of confidence in Durkin's vision and leadership, it also further increased the pressure on Durkin, as well as her visibility. Public scrutiny, already intense for the new superintendent, suddenly skyrocketed. In the case of the high school, the turnaround plan required the district to redesign the school and replace at least 50% of the staff. The impact on the community was felt broadly: parents were concerned about high school graduation; students were unsure about how they would be affected; and staff were worried about losing their jobs, resulting in many growing angry, disengaged, and distracted from teaching.

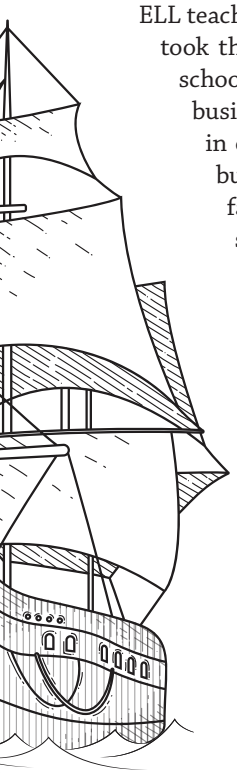
For both Parker Elementary and the high school, Durkin, with facilitation and support from DMC, convened a local stakeholder group of parents and community members and a School Redesign Team made of teachers and administrators from the schools. While some staff feared the changes and the increased expectations that the turnaround would bring, those on the Redesign Team embraced the chance to reinvent the schools. Durkin used the state-mandated turnaround process as an opportunity to build bridges with the community and win support at a time when fear and uncertainty were running high.



Resistance to the turnaround work surfaced quickly. In January 2014, the New Bedford Educators Association gathered its entire membership for a vote of "no confidence" in Durkin. Though the vote fell short of declaring

no confidence, the teachers were still divided, and the public had taken notice. By May 2014, with Durkin in her position for less than a year, the union successfully passed a no confidence resolution and called for her resignation. Durkin responded by saying that she "absolutely" would not resign, and her resolve was buoyed by the support of key local leaders. The city's mayor and the Massachusetts commissioner of education both publicly supported her, and she received full support from the school committee. In fact, even a long-standing critic on the school committee spoke up to defend her, and went further by publicly calling out the union president for his role in the district's struggles.

Though under fire, Durkin was committed to staying in the district and leading the turnaround. Rather than leaving the community and stakeholders divided, Durkin set about winning over and uniting the factions. With budget season upon her, Durkin had little time to pause, and immediately launched a campaign among local leaders and the community to pass an increased budget that would allow for needed improvements: funding for a new reading program, support for the redesign plan at the high school, funding for new ELL teachers, and a redesign of special education. Durkin took the time to hold one-on-one conversations with school committee members and sit-downs with local business CEOs and dozens of community leaders in order to build a coalition of support. When the budget was passed by the school committee but faced opposition from the city council, Durkin spent a marathon session arguing her case in front of the city council. She was grilled with questions about the effectiveness of her proposed plans, but ultimately won the day for the students of New Bedford. As one city council member said, "You're a tough woman, Dr. Durkin, and I like that. You're going to get your budget."



Durkin hired a community relations manager, a young reporter from the local paper to help her further engage the community. Working with the new community relations manager, Durkin established many new communications channels for families to learn about the changes happening at schools. They held "community conversations" at local community institutions, meeting parents where they already were. They began sending regular press releases celebrating achievements and successes, and as a result of all these efforts, the conversations gradually began to change for the better.

Superintendent Pia Durkin (center), Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester, and Principal Lynn Dessert at John Avery Parker School

Continued outreach and collaboration with the union paid off in Durkin's second year. Durkin and her team brought the union president to the table for a collaborative bargaining process. She told him that this was a chance for him to take part in leading the change rather than seeing it happen to him. After months of negotiations, in March 2015 the two stood side-by-side and announced breakthrough contract negotiations that introduced many important provisions for the district and its teachers.

After a tough first year in the public eye, her efforts to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the turnaround of the New Bedford Public Schools were recognized when, in the fall of 2014, Durkin was given the highly prized honor by the local newspaper of being named "South Coast Woman of the Year."

Building and Distributing Leadership Capacity

With the foundation for change established by the end of Durkin's first year, the most crucial step for Year Two was

The union successfully passed a no confidence resolution and called for her resignation. Durkin responded by saying that she "absolutely" would not resign.

the expansion of the district's leadership team in order to embed and sustain the positive change for the long-term. This process involved identifying, cultivating, and supporting leaders in the central office as well as in the schools.

In the central office, the district created a position for a Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and hired Jason DeFalco, an experienced Massachusetts urban principal, for the job. Beyond that, new directors of literacy, human capital, special education, and English Language Learners were hired.

The expanded capacity for district leadership was apparent in the annual process for building the new AIP. Whereas the first year's AIP had been an effort largely between Durkin and the DMC team, the new AIP was written collaboratively by Durkin, the CAO, and a team of academic directors and high-capacity principals, with DMC playing an advisory and facilitative role. After Durkin and DeFalco defined the end-of-year goals, the work was grouped into initiatives, with each initiative assigned a leader and a team. DMC worked intensively with each leader to draft specific plans to achieve the end-of-year goals and to monitor progress throughout the year. These teams met regularly throughout the year to monitor progress and to hold each other accountable; at quarterly meetings, they looked at student data to assess progress and impact.

Other changes and new leadership structures served to further broaden the district's leadership capacity. Durkin and DeFalco created a team specifically charged with overseeing and guiding the change efforts and ensuring that changes were reaching the classroom. They also brought together top teachers from all levels to form the Teacher Advisory Group; knowing that teacher leadership was essential to the success of turnaround, Durkin and DeFalco had this group meet regularly during the year to provide feedback on what was working and what was not. Principal meetings, previously used for administrative business, were transformed into collaborative professional learning time, delivered either by the strengthened curriculum team or by principals teaching one another. For the first time, principals were collaborating, openly discussing challenges they faced and strategies that had worked. As capacity was built among teachers and school and district leaders, Durkin was able to move from a purely directive role to a collaborative approach.

As is typical during a turnaround, the district saw substantial turnover among principals. In some cases, Durkin had encouraged the departures, but in other cases, valued principals chose to leave due to burnout or a desire for a less challenging role in another district. While momentum for change had grown, having so many new principals leading schools was a setback and created a sense of uncertainty among teachers. With so many new leaders in place, Durkin knew that her second year would require starting all over again in building the skill and will for turnaround leadership in the new team.

Today, the district has revamped its principal recruiting and hiring to adapt to the lessons learned from seeing principals hired with high hopes, only to depart a year later. Principal candidates now undergo extensive vetting through a three-part process: (1) a rigorous interview with a panel of central office leaders, school faculty, and parents; (2) a performance task, in which candidates are asked to analyze data, create action plans, and provide feedback on a video of teacher instruction; and (3) a final interview with Durkin, the CAO, and the head of human capital to ascertain fit and commitment. Additionally, the district is partnering with nearby Bridgewater State University to offer a sponsored principal license and degree track for selected staff from NBPS, with the hope that those who take part will sign a letter of commitment to work in NBPS after completing the program.

Deepening the Focus on Instruction

As the 2014-15 school year began and Durkin entered her second year, she and her team redoubled their efforts to ensure that there would be an ever-increasing focus on instruction. Whereas the first year had been marked by "triage" to hold the district together while it underwent leadership changes and school turnarounds, the real work of improving the quality of instruction was now starting in earnest.

Elementary teachers faced their biggest change in working practices in years: the district had purchased and adopted a rigorous, Common Core–aligned reading program and expected all K-5 teachers to use it. The new program shook up teachers' old habits; those who had taught with the old program for years now had to learn a new program, and more importantly, a new way to teach. The district used all mandatory professional development time (pre-service days and two full in-service days) as opportunities to train teachers on the new material. Teachers impressed district leaders by attending additional voluntary training sessions in large numbers.

District academic staff also deepened and extended the rigor rubric, transforming it into a more comprehensive New Bedford Instructional Framework. The framework, which set common expectations for both teachers and principals, consisted of a set of tools, guides, and exemplars covering planning, instruction, data use, and differentiation. Through weekly video updates, DeFalco emphasized and elaborated on "I Do, We Do, You Do" as the core model for instruction in NBPS. Whereas in the past, grievances had been the standard response to any attempt by a principal to talk to teachers about lesson planning, the New Bedford Instructional Framework gave principals and teachers a new way to talk about quality lessons; the submission of lesson plans was no longer a bureaucratic exercise. Teachers heard a uniform message that good instruction means giving students time to practice and struggle. Principals provided model lessons and gave feedback, encouraged teachers to deliver shorter mini-lessons, monitor student practice, and engage students to talk to one another. The practices that are recognized as core to excellent teaching began to take hold in New Bedford classrooms.

Even as district leaders saw progress in the quality of instruction in the fall of 2015, they knew that there were still bottlenecks to improvement: there was limited professional learning time for teachers, and union bumping rules prevented principals from filling positions until the summer. Durkin, DeFalco, and a new director of Human Capital Services began to engage union leadership to find common ground and used a facilitated process called interest-based bargaining. They recognized the importance of making major changes to the teacher contract, given the state's findings that it "hinders the efforts of principals to improve the quality of teachers' instruction." Ultimately, they arrived at a teacher contract that would add 20 hours of professional development time throughout the year that was to be led by principals, other administrators, or talented teachers. On top of that, the union and district agreed to new timelines for announcing vacancies and hiring teachers that put New Bedford on an earlier timeline than surrounding districts, making it easier for principals to hire talented teachers. The district continued its aggressive recruiting strategy and increased the number and quality of events to attract high-quality teachers and leaders to the district; the district even established its own local career fair with a booth for each school staffed by teachers to help recruit. The message this time to the community was not only clear, but also new: quality teaching matters, and the union and the administration were working together to ensure quality teaching in every classroom. Now, teachers and the teachers' union were ready to support the New Bedford Public Schools' turnaround.

Signs of Success

During the 2014-15 school year, district leaders, principals, and teachers saw many reasons to be optimistic that their efforts were paying off. The district's internal assessments looked positive by the end of the school year, but the district had been disappointed in the past when strong internal results had not translated to state test scores. There was reason to be especially wary this year, when students would take the Common Core–aligned PARCC test for the first time. Principals reported that they were seeing more rigorous instruction, but district leaders knew that there were still many classrooms where students were receiving poor instruction. The district had more promising feedback from parents and community members, with 60% agreeing that

For the first time, teachers and principals had common expectations for instruction, which created a foundation for feedback, coaching, and professional development.

NBPS was improving, compared to 30% the previous year; however, without tangible student results in hand, it was hard to know if the progress was real.

Solid confirmation arrived with the 2015 PARCC test results. Delivery of the results had been delayed while the state worked to calibrate the new test with the old, and the results finally arrived in November 2015, nearly six months after students had taken the test. The results were phenomenal (Exhibit 3). In nearly every grade for both reading and math, student achievement levels had trended upward, even with the more rigorous test. More encouraging still, the student growth scores had improved by 5 to 10 points in most grade levels. While the high school results were not as positive, the broad improvements in grades K-8 were a solid sign of success. More good news followed when the district learned that a number of their schools had moved up one level in the Massachusetts school rating system, including two schools that moved from Level 2 to Level 1, the highest level. The results affirmed what many had hoped, but had been afraid to believe: the turnaround effort, with all its bumps and setbacks, was building a better district for students.

Moving Forward

Durkin and others in the district know that the turnaround is far from accomplished, and that many challenges still lie ahead. The district still has early release for elementary students on Fridays, depriving students of equal learning time compared to students in the rest of the state. Many teachers

Exhibit 3 **WIDESPREAD GAINS ACROSS GRADE LEVELS AND SUBJECT AREAS**

Composite performance index, gain in SY 2014-15 compared to SY 2013-14*

Grade	SY 2014-15 ELA CPI	ELA Improvement	SY 2014-15 Math CPI	Math Improvement
3	78.5	+3.2	78.6	-0.4
4	71.0	+5.9	71.1	+2.6
5	79.2	+3.5	72.0	+1.8
6	79.8	+3.5	73.0	+2.8
7	77.6	+2.3	56.6	+2.2
8	79.9	+1.1	62.9	+7.0
DISTRICT	77.7	+2.6	69.5	+2.3

* Composite Performance Index is a number that can range from 0 to 100 and represents the achievement level of the average student in a district. For example, in 2015, district CPI scores ranged from 60 to 100, with only a handful of districts below 60 CPI and more than half the districts over 90.

Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/general.aspx?topNavId=1&orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&

are struggling to transform their own practice to meet the district's more rigorous expectations, and principals are still learning how to help those teachers effectively. The middle schools and high school still have their share of problems, both with academics and school climate. Principal turnover continues to be a challenge for building momentum, with 12 out of the 25 principals needing to be replaced for the start of the 2015-16 school year.

Nonetheless, there is now optimism about the future. The district has come a long way since Durkin's entry in 2013, when leadership capacity was so dire that the DMC team had to fill the gaps to keep the basic functions of the district running. From top to bottom, the district has successfully

Superintendent Pia Durkin's approach requires spending significant time in schools and classrooms

reignited a focus on instruction. Conversations about rigorous instruction are now pervasive, with educators gathering to talk about students' progress and to dissect what is working instructionally and what is not. The culture has become less risk-averse, with teachers and principals more willing to try something new in their practice, and more willing to admit when they need to learn something new themselves. The district has taken an innovative approach to meet the needs of the large and newly identified ELL population, creating an ELL Academy to "grow their own" strong teachers.

The district's progress over the past three years is rooted in its human capital. Durkin made it a goal to recruit and develop strong leaders and principals for the district, and the investment of time and resources is paying off. Not only is NBPS seeing real movement in student results, but the early successes and the base of strong leaders is generating positive talk about New Bedford, making it easier to recruit more and better staff at all levels, and further accelerate change. Alongside the improvements to human capital, the district, with the help of DMC, now has the systems needed to support a high-functioning team: a New Bedford Instructional Framework, an aligned assessment system, a collaborative approach to building and leading professional development, a human capital system, and a finance system. These systems ensure that the momentum is sustained and can endure beyond the tenure of any one individual. Durkin, DeFalco, and the many principals, teachers, and staff have taken leadership and ownership for building a better district for NBPS students. They are bringing hope to the community that New Bedford will soon shine brightly again. ◆

Changing the Course:

Reflections on the Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

Dr. Pia Durkin

During my first few months as superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, I met with many community members in a variety of forums, but one particular conversation brought home the magnitude of the challenge ahead. A community member, who proudly told me she had lived in New Bedford for over 20 years and was a proud homeowner, listened to my vision for building the future of the New Bedford Public Schools. When she heard me say that turnaround work was not for everyone and that some administrators and teachers would likely choose to leave, she looked at me and said, "But if people leave, who will want to come here?" At that moment, it became very clear to me that a massive shift in district culture would be needed to help New Bedford become an excellent school district for its children and families. It became equally clear that to reach the kids, the adults had to believe that an excellent school district was a real possibility for New Bedford.

Committed to urban education and always up for tackling a challenge, I was intrigued by the opportunity to manage a turnaround situation and to make a significant impact on students' lives. Thus, I pursued the opportunity at New Bedford Public Schools, and in July 2013, I assumed the superintendency.

Based on a review of the district's performance, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education had already designated New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) a Level 4, "underperforming" district. In addition, early in my first year, New Bedford High School was downgraded to a Level 4 school and the Parker Elementary School was downgraded to a Level 5 school. With 26 schools and almost 13,000 students, 75% of whom were on free and reduced lunch, New Bedford Public Schools was among the lowest performing districts in the state. The district had the lowest graduation rates in the state at 60%, little growth in student performance over the past few years, and was teetering on the brink of being designated a Level 5, "chronically underperforming" district, which would signal state receivership.

As the fourth superintendent in five years, I knew that I had challenges ahead. New Bedford had tried virtually every academic intervention you can name, but with little success. I knew there would be much work to do to improve teaching and learning and to increase the capacity of teachers and leaders across the district. But more urgent challenges than I had even imagined awaited me: multiple lawsuits against the district were pending; tensions abounded between central office and the schools; an often antagonistic relationship had existed between the superintendent and the school committee; eight principal positions were vacant; two business managers had recently resigned, and the business office lacked staff with the appropriate skills; the human resource office was manned by a head clerk who had a paper filing system to maintain employee records; and, after a long vacancy, a new facilities manager had just been hired for a district with the state's largest stock of 90-year-old buildings. As I stepped into my office on July 1, I also had to deal with the aftermath of a $3 million budget deficit discovered during the 2012-13 school year, which resulted in programs being disbanded and extensive staff layoffs that impacted virtually every program and service in the district.

When I accepted the position, I had felt energized to tackle a turnaround and to make a difference for this district and community; but within a few short months, I realized the challenges before me were more than I ever could have imagined. Yet, I was determined to have

DR. PIA DURKIN

Superintendent

New Bedford Public Schools (MA)
July 2013–present

2006-2013
Superintendent
Attleboro Public Schools (MA)

2004-2006
Associate Director
Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

2003-2004
Superintendent
Narragansett Public Schools (RI)

1999-2003
Assistant Superintendent of Special Education, Guidance, and Other Unified Student Services
Boston Public Schools (MA)

1992-1998
Special Education Director
Providence Public Schools (RI)

M.A. and Ph.D.,
New York University

B.A. Queens College,
Elementary Education

I had felt energized to tackle a turnaround and to make a difference for this district and community; but within a few short months, I realized the challenges before me were more than I ever could have imagined.

an impact here, and rolled up my sleeves and dug in. Now, as we are approaching the end of our third year and NBPS is deep into turnaround work, we are finally getting evidence that the district is on the move. While I am very proud of our accomplishments thus far, I know we still have a tremendous amount of hard work ahead of us.

Building Support

One of the keys to weathering the persistent and often overwhelming challenges I faced as leader of a turnaround district was my relationship with the school committee, the Mayor, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). I could not have made such bold and courageous moves without the strong support of these important parties.

The school committee and the superintendent had often been at odds in the past, but this school committee had made the decision to hire me and clearly wanted a superintendent who would lead change. But I knew that I could not take this as a given, and that sustaining their support would require transparency and frequent communication. An essential part of my role has been to keep members of the school committee informed. I have made a practice of scheduling individual meetings with committee members; though time-consuming, this has been key to sustaining their support. Not only do these meetings allow me to hear and gauge their concerns, but they provide an opportunity for committee members to ask questions that they may be reluctant to ask in public. I give them the facts and data where applicable, share very candidly my thoughts and reasoning, and invite questions and encourage difficult discussions so that concerns can be aired openly. My objective, at a minimum, is for there to be no surprises for members of the committee; at best, I hope to gain their support and equip them with the information to make their support of me highly defensible. I invest in these relationships in order to build the trust that is needed to make hard decisions and weather the storms that inevitably arise.

Similarly, with the Mayor and DESE, it is critical not only to keep the lines of communication open, but to create opportunities for candid discussion. While all parties want to see the district make a successful turnaround and improve results for the students of New Bedford, conflicting interests come into play. DESE's interest is in supporting the turnaround and seeing results as quickly as possible. The Mayor has the same objectives, but he has to answer to his various constituent groups and manage the politics surrounding each and every position he takes. Because there had been a string of superintendents who preceded me, the school committee, the Mayor, district leaders, and DESE had grown used to working in isolation from one another. As a new superintendent stepping onto a stage where many prior superintendents had failed, I had to make it clear that any decisions or plans involving New Bedford Public Schools needed to involve me and that everyone should look to me to lead where it concerns public education in New Bedford. Maintaining this alignment and communication has been time-consuming and complicated work, but essential to the success of our turnaround efforts.

The support of all these parties proved important when, in January 2014, DESE named me the receiver for Parker Elementary School. Earlier in the school year, this school had been named a Level 5 school, but I became the only superintendent in the state to be named a receiver. Due to the trust and alliances I had established with the school

committee and the Mayor as well as DESE, this news was favorably received by all these stakeholders.

I would be remiss not to mention how fortunate I have been to be working with the District Management Council (DMC) as the plan manager hired by DESE. DMC has provided tremendous support and has been an important partner in this turnaround. They helped me develop the general improvement plan for the district, and their team rolled up their sleeves and helped me with a great deal of blocking and tackling, particularly in the first year, while always keeping an eye to building capacity within the district. DMC helped me manage both the Level 4 turnaround plan for the high school and the Level 5 turnaround plan for the Parker School. They also managed all the monitoring work and collection of evidence that the district needed for accountability purposes. The team helped to define what rigorous instruction looked like and devised tools to assess each principal's understanding of rigorous instruction. Through this work on rigor and my persistent focus with principals on the quality of instruction in each and every classroom, teaching and learning has become a central focus of our turnaround efforts. The team at DMC was an important outside partner that helped support me through a very challenging transition.

Leading with Confidence in the Face of "No Confidence"

An essential factor to a successful turnaround is showing strong leadership and establishing one's place and authority as superintendent. I needed the support of key players and worked hard to create these alliances, but it was important for me to assert myself and assume my role as leader of the district.

On May 8, 2014, the New Bedford Educators Association, for the second time, put my leadership to the test. They took a no confidence vote, and this time the majority called for my resignation. I immediately made it very clear that I absolutely would not resign. As a testament to the trust and support I had been cultivating, the school committee, the Mayor, State Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester, and a growing segment of the community all stood by me. In fact, the no confidence vote created the opportunity for all these parties to step forward and articulate their support for what they referred to as the "bold" plan that we had embarked upon and to affirm their confidence in my leadership and the reforms we were undertaking. This strengthened my resolve to stay the course and work with staff willing to reinvent themselves in order for our plan to come to fruition.

It took until March of 2015, nearly two years into my superintendency, for me to solidify my working relationship with the president of the New Bedford Educators Association. Our disagreements, which were both frequent and intense, began as soon as I became superintendent, and the adversarial nature of our relationship made progress extremely difficult. In the winter of 2014–15, our struggles came to a head. In a frank conversation, I let him know that I wanted to work with him to make the New Bedford Public Schools a better place for students and teachers; this was his chance to take part in leading the change rather than seeing it happen to him. I told him, "One day I will be standing on the steps of the White House being recognized for the success in New Bedford. You can be there by my side, or you can be watching at home." After months of negotiations, in March 2015, we stood side-by-side and announced a breakthrough. Teachers would have more professional development time, and there would be new processes and timelines for hiring teachers each spring.

The school budgeting process also presented significant challenges during my first two years in New Bedford. The city had historically operated with the minimum school funding required by the state, and there was little confidence that investing more money in the school system would produce better results. But, to effect a turnaround, a massive influx of resources was needed to support teaching and learning. In 2014, my budget request went well beyond the required school spending, including funding for a new K-5 reading program and resources for the high school and Parker turnaround plans. For the first time in anyone's memory, funding above the state's required school spending was approved. We won support for a $7 million increase to our school budget with $3 million to cover turnaround plans at New Bedford High School and the John A. Parker School, $2.4 million for salary increases, and

I had to make it clear that any decisions or plans involving New Bedford Public Schools needed to involve me and that everyone should look to me to lead where it concerns public education in New Bedford.

$1.2 million for longer school days. The business manager and I weathered almost four hours of questions. A City Council member said to me afterwards, "We are going to get killed, but you are going to get the support you need."

Creating a Team and Cultivating Talent

Despite the support I have had from the school committee, the Mayor, and DESE, one of the most significant challenges of my new position has been creating a team and attracting and cultivating talent. As is often the case, I came into the district alone, and did not bring my own team with me. Getting to know the staff in the district and forging a team that united the leadership at both the central office and the school level to lead rapid, transformational change was perhaps my most significant challenge.

I discovered a central office lacking many of the needed skills and often working at odds with the principals. The principals had not felt involved in decision-making, and experienced a very bureaucratic, top-down approach from central office leaders. With so much work needed in the schools, finding time to build a new central office staff proved to be time-consuming and challenging. But our ability to make rapid progress depended on strong district-level leadership. I had to scramble in my first year to fill numerous positions in the business and human resources departments. In all, over my first three years of turnaround work in New Bedford, I replaced virtually all the senior-level leaders in the central office with new leadership committed to our turnaround work.

It was also critical for me to find principals who had both the "will and skill" to take on this very difficult work. Rather than the traditional posting and advertising, I used my state-wide network to find talent. Though the geography of the region was a challenge, my biggest barrier was the reputation of the district itself. The district had for so long seen itself as failing that even quality candidates from within the schools were averse to stepping up to take on leadership roles. Recruiting conversations were less about how low performing the district was or where it was and more about IF the conditions were ripe for change. I continually emphasized that this was an incredible opportunity to "be part of the successful turnaround story of New Bedford." My original belief that

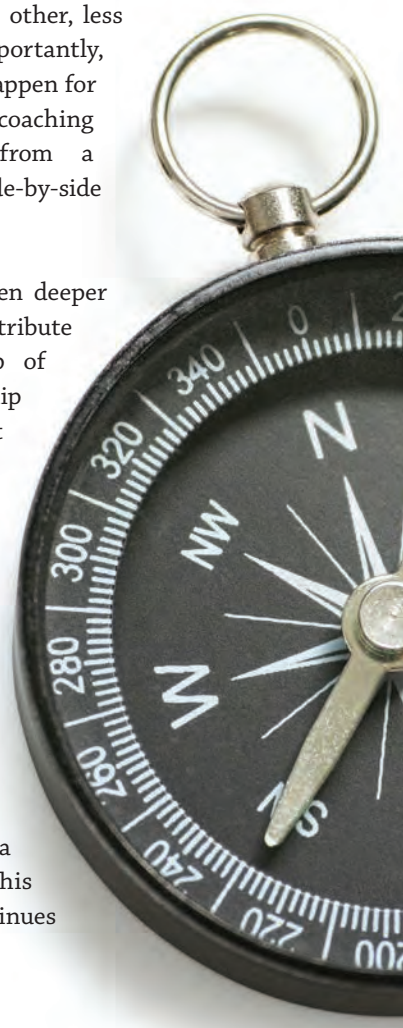
Superintendent Pia Durkin with NBPS students

By working directly with principals, I believed that I had a shot at changing district culture because each principal affects dozens of adults who affect hundreds of children. This work was the right work.

"turnaround work was not for everyone" proved to be true. Some new hires were not up for the challenges that faced the schools. And I learned that above all, urban experience was key to success and, if not urban experience, there had to be a keen understanding of the challenges of an urban district.

As I slowly rebuilt central office and the principal ranks, it became clear that it would be necessary for me to work with principals to jumpstart the turnaround process. By working directly with principals, I believed that I had a shot at changing district culture because each principal affects dozens of adults who affect hundreds of children. This work was the right work. I talked candidly with principals who had been in the district for years. I made it clear in my first year that both will and skill were required of those who stayed. Those who stayed would be leaders who accepted no excuses, and were invested in the future of New Bedford's children. Many school leaders were honest enough to tell me what they did not know, and what they had tried to do with their schools. They spoke with passion and shared their experiences of how bad decisions had led the district to its current state. They were candid about their own inadequacies and called me often to ask questions. Others gave countless examples of why their schools were not improving, and clearly had very low expectations for the adults and students in their buildings. They used factors of poverty, language barriers, and special education needs as reasons for their schools' doing so poorly. With those conversations, I quickly learned who had the skill and the will to engage in the deep, challenging work needed to turn around the New Bedford Schools.

Over three years, I've found many of the right leaders so that today the district has leaders with the grit, the determination to learn, and the willingness to apply and adapt what they know to our unique circumstances. Of the 26 principals in place when I arrived in the district three years ago, six remain today. Nine of the current school and district leaders came from within, and three leaders returned to New Bedford after having worked in other, less challenging districts. Most importantly, they all believe excellence can happen for urban kids. They are open to coaching and intensive supervision from a superintendent who works side-by-side with them.



Each year, our progress has been deeper and more accelerated, and I attribute that to the expanding group of leaders who have taken ownership of the turnaround work. My first year, I had to rely heavily on DMC as an outside partner, because the district did not have the capacity, and many of the staff had not bought into the need for change. Last year, many new hires in the central office and many experienced principals began to come together regularly to review progress on their assigned initiatives, and a great deal was accomplished. This year, an expanded group continues

to advance the work, meeting regularly not only to review progress against our plan, but to review data and verify that the work is having an impact for students. Our leadership at the central office and building level have the resilience, the commitment, and the skill to succeed in raising achievement for some of the Commonwealth's neediest students.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the challenges and progress made in my first three years in New Bedford, I find many lessons that will inform my leadership actions in the future. What is clear is that a district in crisis needs bold change and a steady hand to guide that change. Here are some of the most important lessons I've learned thus far:

- Improved outcomes for students cannot be gained or sustained without confronting the culture of the district that created the failure in the first place. Low expectations for student learning as well as low expectations for adult performance must be challenged at every turn.

- It takes the entire community to improve a school system. Partnerships with stakeholders both inside the school district and in the community are critical. These partnerships build hope and create confidence in teachers and leaders; they provide political cover for bold change; and they often generate additional resources that are needed to support the turnaround efforts.

- The knowledge and skill of teachers and leaders underpin all improvement. Without highly skilled teachers, students do not make progress. Without effective principals and leaders, teachers do not improve their craft and turnaround is not possible. When the talents of teachers and leaders are focused on common, rigorous expectations for student learning, improvement will follow.

Superintendent Pia Durkin walking to school with students and parents

- Leadership exists in all corners of the district. In addition to central office and principal leaders, teacher leaders can help bring improved teaching to the classroom. And teachers' voices must be at the forefront of decision making when making changes. Fostering teacher leadership—with a large and a small *L*—can be a powerful lever to create district turnaround.

- Politics play a role in urban education. Strong leaders need to accept the politics, pay attention to them, and manage them without compromising core values.

Lastly, there are many moving parts in district turnaround that need to be tackled at once. Leading the work with a strong hand and unflinching, relentless tenacity are fundamental.

Results and Next Steps

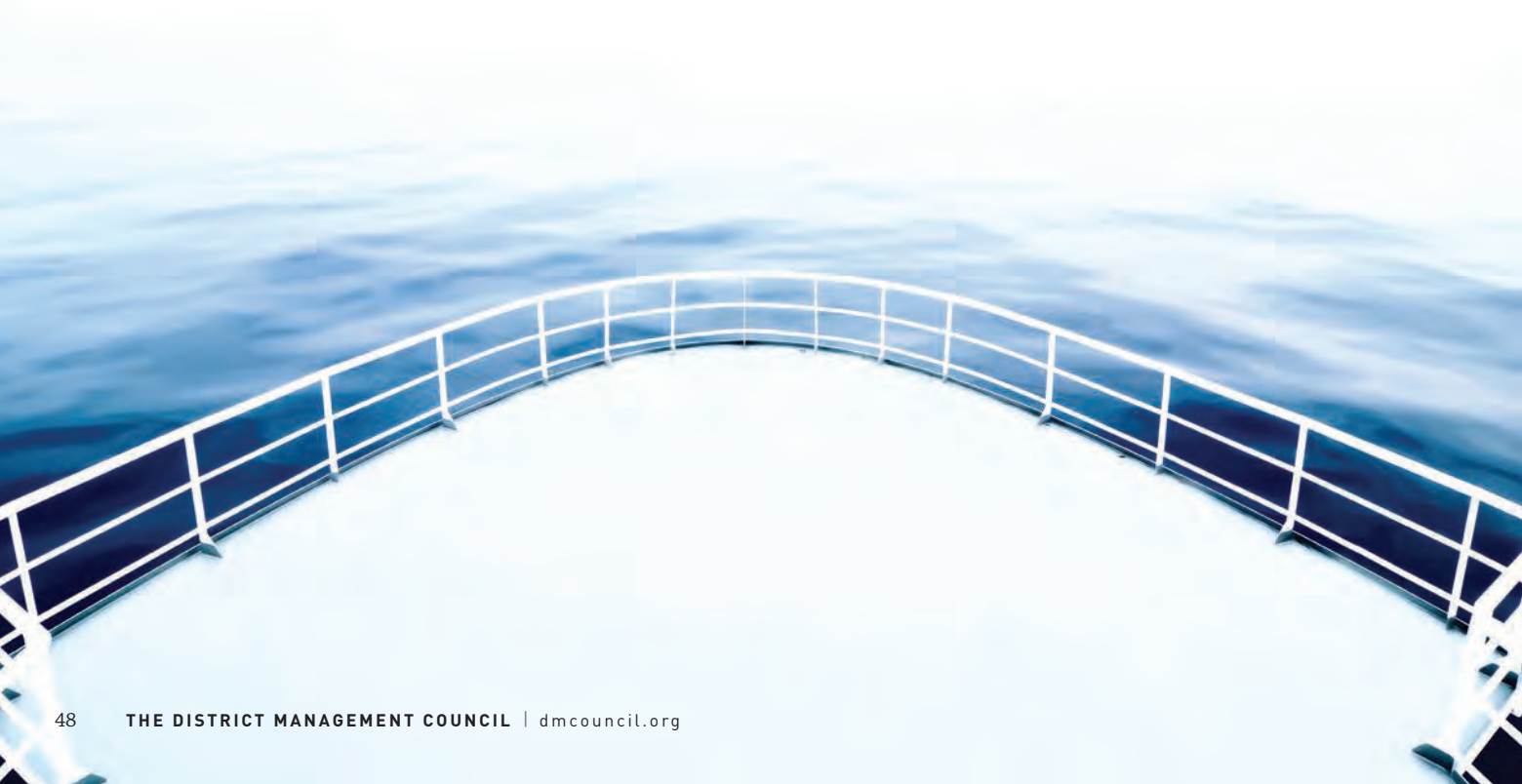
The district's efforts and strategy are starting to produce results. There are indicators that the overall focus on leadership, curriculum, and instruction is taking hold. On the spring 2015 PARCC assessment, results showed 16 out of 22

I was in this turnaround work for the long haul and together we would stay the course regardless of the challenges. Together we are "in it to win it."

schools increasing in statewide percentile rankings (the 22 schools do not include the high school, two alternative schools, and one school that closed). Two of the 22 tested schools showed flat results, while four schools declined. Overall, New Bedford students grew to the 51st percentile in statewide growth on the English Language Arts exam, outgrowing more than half of the districts in the Commonwealth from the prior year. In mathematics, students grew to the 48th percentile. The English Language Arts growth rate grew by 11 percentile points from the year prior, while the math results climbed 6 percentile points.

At New Bedford High School, the five-year adjusted graduation rate has climbed to over 70% for the first time in the school's history. The high school team has doubled down on their efforts to strengthen classroom instruction for all students, and has designed a series of additional pathways to help students reach new credit requirements under the new Massachusetts High School Program of Studies (MassCore).

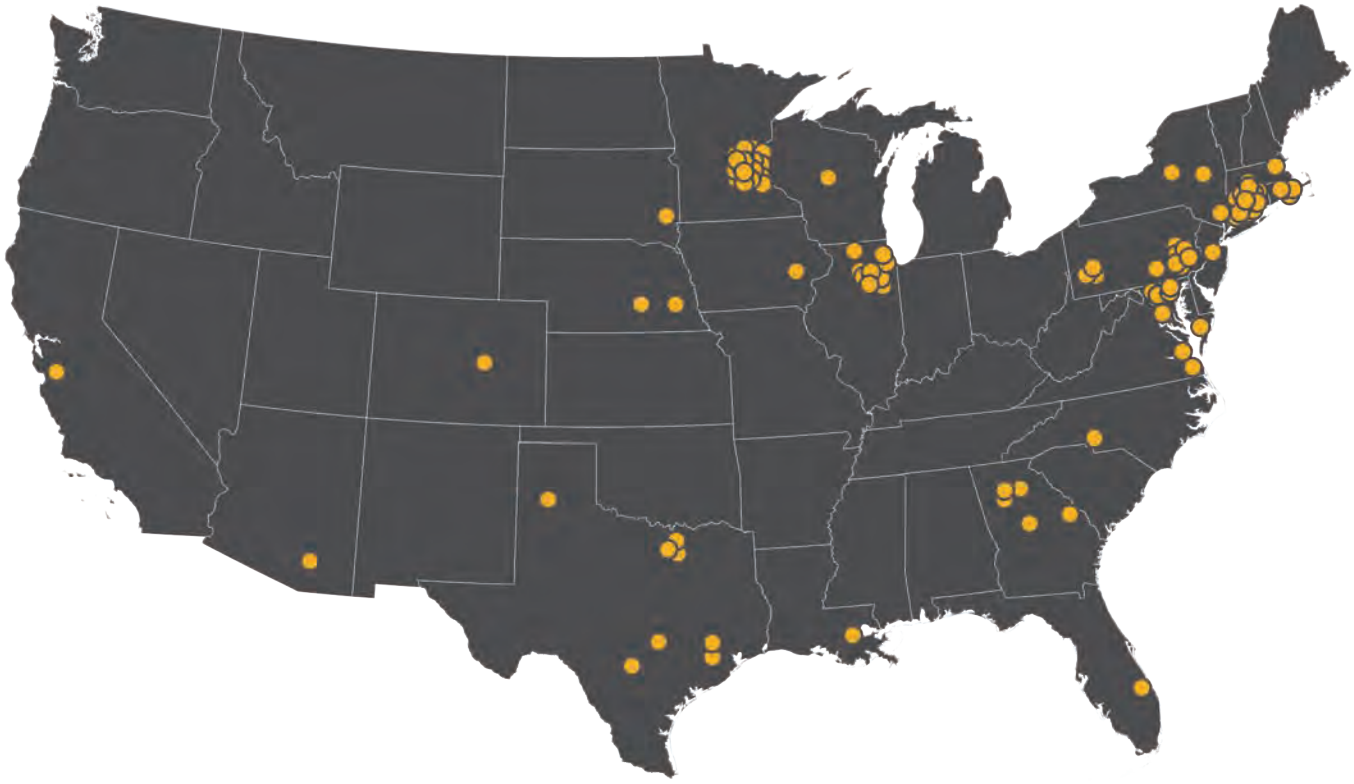
The challenge of turnaround is that a multitude of leadership and management issues must be tackled, but taking these on all at once can seem overwhelming. It takes persistence and steady and consistent leadership to make progress on these issues. In the spring of 2015, I asked the school committee to renew my contract a year early, extending it to 2019 as a signal to the community that I was committed to New Bedford. The school committee endorsed my request with a 7-0 vote of confidence. This sent a strong message to the community and to my staff that I was in this turnaround work for the long haul and that together we would stay the course regardless of the challenges. Together we are "in it to win it." ◆



JOIN DMC

Become part of a national network of forward-thinking leaders focused on improving performance in public education

nearly 150 school districts
1,200 district leaders
across 22 states
serving 2.6+ million students



A membership with DMC connects your district with K-12 leaders nationwide and provides you with access to best-practices research, professional development conferences, and the tools school district leaders need to achieve results.

JOIN TODAY: 877-DMC-3500
INFO@DMCOUNCIL.ORG
WWW.DMCOUNCIL.ORG

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

HELPING SCHOOL DISTRICTS MANAGE FOR SUCCESS

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

DMC's 13th Annual Superintendents' Strategy Summit

January **2016**

Shifting Resources
to Support Strategic Priorities

Nearly 90 DMC member superintendents from across the nation, representing 14 states and serving more than 1.2 million students, gathered in New York City to explore the topic of *Shifting Resources to Support Strategic Priorities*.

While student achievement is the ultimate goal of all districts, the often divergent needs of stakeholders and long-standing ways of doing things can greatly influence how resources are allocated. As a result, resource allocation often is not fully aligned with the district's stated priorities. At the Summit, participants examined how a comprehensive, systemic approach to managing resources can allow districts to meet the needs of students, staff, and taxpayers despite tight budgets.

We focused on some key high-leverage strategies for resource realignment; these strategies were identified based on impact on student achievement, financial benefit, political feasibility, and certainty of gain relative to the complexity of implementation. We also discussed some tools to facilitate a shift in resources: being highly specific about the desired resource shift, gathering detailed data about the current use of resources and their impact, taking a fresh look at current practices through benchmarking, and building a shared understanding of the need for change.

Because winning support is so critical to shifting resources successfully, a variety of strategies were explored to create shared understanding and reduce pushback. Particular focus was given to the following tactics:

- **Conduct formal joint fact-finding:** joint fact-finding allows district leaders and other impacted stakeholders to gather facts together as well as to challenge the facts as a group along the way.
- **Know what people actually do:** differing perceptions of how staff spend their time can often derail strategic resource shifts. Detailed information about how time is used often provides insights.
- **Know what works:** a methodical, dispassionate, and patient process of evaluating what's working, for whom, and at what cost can help stakeholders understand budget changes. Objective studies of a program's Academic Return on Investment (A-ROI) can be a powerful way to build shared understanding.

NEW YORK
JAN. 2016

Left page: Top: Curt Tryggestad, Superintendent, Eden Prairie Schools (MN), and Richard F. Dunlap, Jr., Superintendent, Upper Darby School District (PA). **Center:** Kelly M. Lyman, Superintendent, Mansfield Public Schools (CT), and Paul Freeman, Superintendent, Guilford Public Schools (CT). **Bottom:** Kriti Parashar, Director, District Management Council.

Right page: Top left: Curtis Jones, Jr., Superintendent, Bibb County School District (GA), Ehren Jarrett, Superintendent, Rockford Public Schools (IL), and Isaac Joseph, Superintendent, Jefferson Parish Public School System (LA). **Top right:** Darren Kermes, Executive Director, SouthWest Metro Educational Cooperative (MN), Linda Madsen, Superintendent, Forest Lake Area Schools (MN), and Brian White, Superintendent, Chartiers Valley School District (PA). **Center:** David Moyer, Superintendent, Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205 (IL), and Charles Dupre, Superintendent, Fort Bend Independent School District (TX). **Bottom:** John Kim, Chief Executive Officer, District Management Council, leading a case study discussion.

Characteristics of Successful Joint Fact-Finding

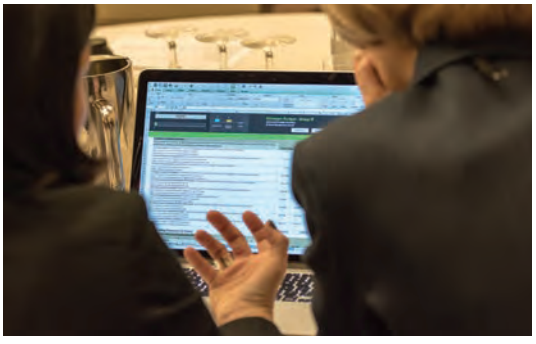
A common reason that good people fight against changes to spending is because various parties have different understandings of the current reality. Presenting stakeholders with charts, tables, graphs, and memos can often make it more difficult to achieve consensus. In contrast, Joint Fact-Finding is one strategy that can help, and here are some best practices to keep in mind:

- **Start early in the year:** during budget time, fact finding can be more difficult and contentious
- **Lead with facts before solutions:** starting with facts can prevent stakeholders from forming judgments based on incorrect information or misunderstandings.
- **Share raw data from the beginning:** allowing doubters to comb through the raw data is particularly important. Share the raw data, and even doubters may come to the same conclusions.
- **Be sure data is "good" data:** databases are often inaccurate or incomplete. Data cleaning is an important step.

Superintendents' Strategy Summit, continued

NEW YORK
JAN. 2016

Top: Patricia Cosentino, Superintendent, Regional School District 12 (CT), Janet Robinson, Superintendent, Stratford Public Schools (CT), and Diane Ullman, Senior Director, District Management Council. **Center:** Frank Alvarez, Superintendent, Rye City School District (NY), Ana Riley, Superintendent, Portsmouth Public Schools (RI), and Jeffrey Schoonover, Superintendent, Somerset Public Schools and Somerset Berkley Regional School District (MA). **Bottom:** Superintendents work to balance a budget gap for a fictional district during a Strategic Budgeting Simulation exercise.



One of the final sessions of the Summit featured a budget simulation exercise. Superintendents, working in teams, were asked to identify resource shifts to close a 3% budget gap faced by a fictional district. The budget gap needed to be closed while balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders and making additional investments to promote the district's strategic plan. The simulation exercise assessed the impact of each team's decisions on student achievement, operational efficiency, and "karma"—the level of political capital with stakeholders in the community. The variety of different approaches revealed during the activity sparked lively discussion and reflection about strategy, priorities, and tradeoffs.

We hope your district team will join us at our Leadership Development Meetings this year to further explore this topic!

April 28-29, 2016
CHICAGO, IL

October 13-14, 2016
WASHINGTON, DC

November 3-4, 2016
BOSTON, MA

*Visit **dmcouncil.org/ldm** to register or learn more.*

Some High-Leverage Strategies for Resource Realignment*

- Create an Academic Return on Investment (A-ROI) infrastructure to guide investments and strategic abandonment
- Connect the use of federal funds to strategic priorities
- Manage class sizes within acceptable ranges
- Precisely manage special education staffing and use of time

*For a detailed discussion of these ideas and for more strategies for resource realignment, go to dmcouncil.org/spending-money-wisely.

Congratulations to our

Members on the Move

Freeman Burr

Freeman Burr, former superintendent of Shelton Public Schools (CT), retired in January 2016 after serving as superintendent since 2009.

Christopher Clouet

After serving as superintendent of Union Free School District of the Tarrytowns (NY), Christopher Clouet began as superintendent of Shelton Public Schools (CT) in January.

Tony Gasper

Previously deputy superintendent of Windham Public Schools (CT), Tony Gasper became superintendent of Wolcott Public Schools (CT) in November 2015.

Tawana Grover

In July, Tawana Grover will become the next superintendent of Grand Island Public Schools (NE). She is currently chief human resources officer for the DeSoto Independent School District (TX).

Christopher Maher

Christopher Maher began as interim superintendent of Providence Public Schools (RI) in July 2015. Prior to joining the district, he was president of the nonprofit Mass Insight Education.

Colleen Palmer

Colleen Palmer, currently the superintendent of Weston Public Schools (CT), was recently named Connecticut's Superintendent of the Year by the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. In July, she will become superintendent of Westport Public Schools (CT).

Robert Winter

Superintendent of Grand Island Public Schools (NE) since 2011, Robert Winter will retire at the end of this school year.

Daniel Woestman

Daniel Woestman, assistant superintendent in Rockford Public Schools (IL), will become superintendent of Belvidere School District #100 (IL) in July.

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

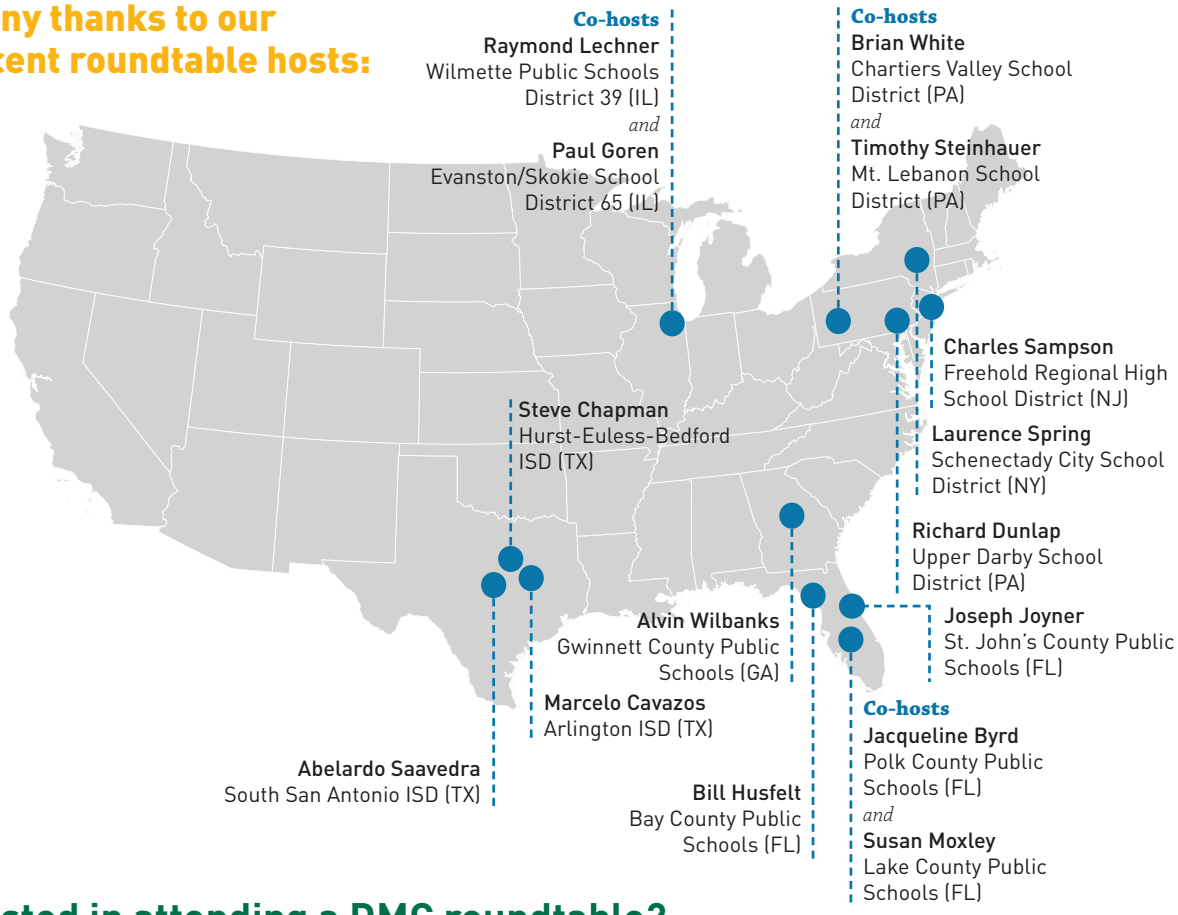
DMC's Regional Roundtables

A central aim of DMC is to bring together forward-thinking district leaders to discuss best-practices research, explore case studies, and share ideas. To this end, in 2015 DMC launched regional roundtable discussions for superintendents and their leadership teams. Thus far, 11 roundtables have been held across the country, each hosted by a DMC-member district. Collectively, these discussions convened more than 145 districts and 330 district leaders to review best-practices research, discuss case studies of how districts implemented such best practices, and share experiences among a diverse group of peers in a region.

WHAT IS A DMC ROUNDTABLE?

DMC Roundtables are half-day regional meetings hosted by DMC-member districts for forward-thinking superintendents and their senior staff. DMC leads discussions about best practices, explores case studies, and promotes a sharing of experiences and lessons learned.

Many thanks to our recent roundtable hosts:



Interested in attending a DMC roundtable?

Interested in hosting a DMC roundtable in your area?

Please contact us at **info@dmcouncil.org** or call **877-DMC-3500.**

DMC Welcomes

Duncan Klussmann

DMC Senior Advisor

DMC is pleased to welcome Dr. Duncan Klussmann as a senior advisor. Klussmann brings to DMC extensive experience as a district leader, innovator, and educator. He was also a longtime DMC member while superintendent of Spring Branch ISD (TX).

Klussmann served as superintendent of Spring Branch ISD from 2004 to 2015, and prior to that served as interim superintendent and as area superintendent for the district. His experience in public education also includes serving as principal, assistant principal, and classroom teacher. During his leadership of Spring Branch ISD, Klussmann launched the SKY Partnership in 2012, a first of its kind public–charter school collaboration, and T-2-4, a plan to double the number of students completing a technical certificate, two-year degree, or four-year degree.

Klussmann was awarded the Hewlett-Packard Fellow in Executive Leadership Award in 2004 and the Lifetime Member Award by the Texas Parent and Teacher Association in 2008. While he was principal, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Spring Branch Middle School the Blue Ribbon as a National Exemplary School (1997-98).

Klussmann holds a B.A. in business administration from the University of Texas at Austin, an M.Ed. from Stephen F. Austin State University, and a Ph.D. in education from Seton Hall University.

WHAT IS A DMC SENIOR ADVISOR?

DMC senior advisors bring a wealth of experience to inform the work that DMC provides to school districts. With backgrounds in education, education management, academia, and the private sector, DMC senior advisors share their varied and rich perspectives, experience, and insights to help us shape the best thinking and solutions for our members and clients. DMC senior advisors are actively involved in select DMC consulting engagements as appropriate.

DMC SENIOR ADVISORS

2015-2016

Dr. Jack Dale served as superintendent of Fairfax County Public Schools (VA) from July 2004 to July 2013. Prior to that, he was superintendent of Frederick County Public Schools (MD) for eight years.

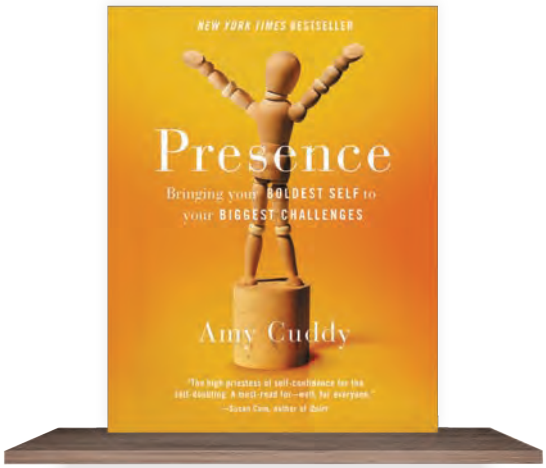
Ms. Hosanna Mahaley Jones was State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia between 2011 and 2013; prior to that, she served as Chief of Staff to Secretary Arne Duncan during his tenure as chief executive of Chicago's Public Schools. She was President of the Atlanta Education Fund and Executive Director of Social Justice for Wireless Generation. She is also a facilitator at Harvard's Public Education Leadership Project.

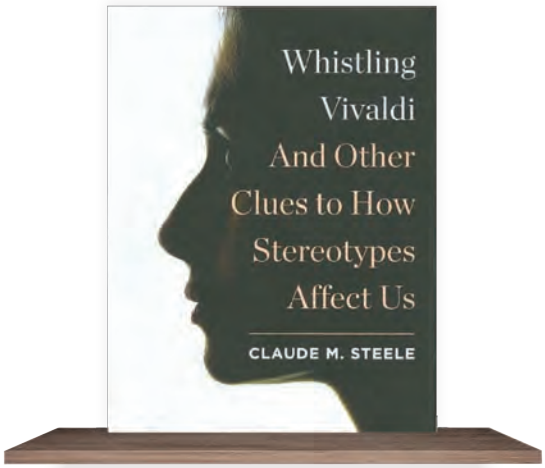
Dr. Duncan Klussmann served as superintendent of Spring Branch ISD (TX) from 2004 to 2015.

Mr. Andrew J. Parsons is Director Emeritus of McKinsey and Company, Inc., a leading international management consultancy.

Dr. Ed Pratt-Dannals served as superintendent of Duval County Public Schools, the nation's 20th largest school district.

Member Bookshelf





Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges

Amy Cuddy

Famous for her TED talk on "power poses," social psychologist and Harvard Business School Professor Amy Cuddy shares this and other simple techniques to tap into our personal power, liberate ourselves from fear in high-pressure situations, and put our best selves forward. "Your body shapes your mind. Your mind shapes your behavior. And your behavior shapes your future. Let your body tell you that you're powerful and deserving, and you become more present, enthusiastic, and authentically yourself," says Cuddy. District and school leaders who are always in the public eye are sure to find practical and inspiring ideas in Cuddy's research, examples, and stories.

Whistling Vivaldi and Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us

Claude M. Steele

Social psychologist and Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost of the University of California, Berkeley, Claude M. Steele sheds new light on racial and gender achievement gaps as well as on a host of other societal problems. Steele's research shows us the profound effects of "stereotype threat"—the fear of what people could think about us solely because of our race, gender, age, etc. In our individualistic society, we tend to downplay or ignore the effect of stereotypes on our identity, but stereotype threat occurs on a near-daily basis and is life-shaping. Steele demonstrates how situational cues affect student performance, and discusses practices that can help educators to remedy racial inequities in education.

MAKE SURE YOUR NEXT STRATEGIC PLAN IS UP TO THE EVER-INCREASING CHALLENGE

DMC can help refine or develop a targeted, inclusive, and actionable strategic plan, including:

- Detailed district needs assessment
- Extensive stakeholder participation
- Widespread buy-in
- Implementation support

CONTACT DMC TO LEARN MORE

877-DMC-3500 OR VISIT WWW.DMCOUNCIL.ORG

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

REGISTER FOR DMC'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT MEETINGS

SHIFTING RESOURCES

TO SUPPORT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

At DMC's Leadership Development Meetings, cross-functional district teams collaboratively tackle the challenge of identifying resources within the existing budget to fund district priorities

- Support cross-functional teams with new ideas and strategies
- Build buy-in among district leaders for new approaches
- Dedicate time for leaders to collaborate outside of an administrative in-district setting

CHICAGO, IL
April 28-29, 2016

WASHINGTON, DC
October 13-14, 2016

BOSTON, MA
November 3-4, 2016

LEARN. SHARE. NETWORK.

www.dmcouncil.org/ldm | events@dmcouncil.org | 877-DMC-3500