



District
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INTERVIEW

Building Bridges to a Better Future

An Interview with Dr. Ray Hart

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An Interview with Dr. Ray Hart

Dr. Ray Hart was appointed in March 2022 to be executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization founded in 1956 and now comprising a coalition of 77 of the nation's largest urban public school systems, serving nearly 8 million students.

Prior to this appointment, Dr. Hart served as director of research for the Council, responsible for working collaboratively with member school districts to identify and analyze major trends, successes, and challenges in urban education nationwide. He was instrumental in developing and launching the organization's Academic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to help drive improvements in student outcomes, and he has led the Council's efforts on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and its Males of Color initiative. Before joining the Council, Dr. Hart was a fellow at ICF International where he led the Analytic Technical Support Task Force for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory (REL). He also served as executive director in the Atlanta Public Schools where he led the redesign of the research and assessment division. Dr. Hart holds a Ph.D. in Evaluation and Measurement from Kent State University, an M.Ed. with a focus on Curriculum and Instruction—Education Research from Cleveland State University, and a bachelor's degree in Industrial and Systems Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

This summer, Dr. Hart was in Boston for the Accelerating Board Capacity Institute (ABC Institute). This unique professional development program, offered by the Council of the Great City Schools through Harvard Business School, brings together the Council's member superintendents and their board members to strengthen capacity and collaboration. John Kim, CEO of District Management Group, professor at Harvard Business School, and faculty chair of the ABC Institute, took this opportunity to chat with Dr. Hart to learn about his vision for the Council of the Great City Schools and to discuss the challenges facing urban public education. We share their conversation in this edited interview.



Dr. Ray C. Hart

Executive Director
Council of the Great City Schools

Congratulations, Ray! Having been at the Council of the Great City Schools for almost ten years leading research efforts, you bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to your new position. Can you share with us what initially prompted you to join the Council?

The value of the Council in supporting urban education drew me in. I first experienced the Council as a member of a school district. I saw the value of being able to connect with peers around the country who were in a similar role. I also saw my superintendent interacting with her peers in a way that was new to me. The superintendents were able to let their hair down, learn from each other, and really connect.

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I was about nine months into doing research at one of the Department of Education's (ED) Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs)—the mid-Atlantic REL—when I got a call from Mike Casserly, the Council's longtime executive director, asking me to work at the Council. I didn't want to leave ED, having just taken the role, but Mike was persistent. “This is the place for you,” he said. In my heart, I knew I belonged working on the ground with school districts and their principals and teachers. It's what I had done my entire career. It was an opportunity to blend legislative work at the federal level with practical work on the ground. So, I joined as the Council's director of research in 2013, where I was able to take what I know about data and apply that knowledge to improving outcomes for our students.

Now, as the new executive director, how do you see the Council's role in urban education evolving?

I am still new to the role, so I am still learning. That said, one of the Council's key strengths is advocating on behalf of urban districts at the federal level—with Congress, the White House, and the Department of Education. That must continue. But I believe the Covid-19

pandemic did something unusual. One, it really shed light on how different our school districts are in terms of providing supports on the ground. And two, it laid bare the fragility of the students, the staff, and our institutions. So I think our role is really to help our districts shore up the support systems that are provided in our districts: the support systems that are provided after school, the support systems provided to our teachers, to our principals, to our principal supervisors, to our chiefs of staff and cabinet-level staff, to our superintendents, and to our school boards—which is why we're here in Boston right now. I think this work post-pandemic has become even more vital. We need to shore up the strength of the local infrastructure.

So, has the pandemic made the role of the Council even more critical?

I don't think it has made the Council more important. Organizations need to shift with the times and be responsive to what is needed for the particular place and time. It's important for organizations to stay

viable. So, I think it's important for our organization and me to think through what is needed at this time while building upon the strengths that have existed.

Some may believe that large urban school districts—the Council's focus—have a set of needs that are not necessarily shared by all school districts. How do you think the Council can have an impact for other districts regardless of size, location, and type?

Believe it or not, urban school districts face the same challenges that all school districts in the country face. If you examine graduation rates across the United States, you'll find that students who don't graduate in non-urban districts have similar characteristics to those who don't graduate in urban schools. I'm willing to bet it's the kids living in poverty, the kids who are English language learners, the kids with special needs. Our large urban districts share the same challenges that other districts face; the difference is in magnitude. Urban school districts have a larger percentage of those students, so the problems are acute. That's what is different.



Ray Hart and John Kim at Harvard Business School for CGCS's Accelerating Board Capacity Institute

Actually, at District Management Group, one of our mottos is that regardless of size, type, or location, districts have a great deal in common. We do believe that. But I do think that scale makes a big difference on certain dimensions.

Yes, but I still think large urban districts can provide important models for other districts. I have a daughter who has special needs. And when my daughter went to high school, her counselors told her they didn't expect her to get an academic diploma and were going to take her down a path of getting a Career and Technical Education degree or working through a vocational program. My wife and I said absolutely not. Over the years, we learned to work with our daughter and prepare her to be successful. She passed all her state exams coming out of elementary and middle school. And, in high school, she needed additional time to be successful, but she ended up taking statistics, Algebra I, Algebra II, chemistry, and everything else she needed to take. She got her academic diploma; actually, she got two diplomas: a vocational diploma *and* an academic diploma. But we advocated for her. What I've come to understand is that all students can be successful. What does it take for us to advocate for them all?

If urban school districts can help solve the problem of educating students in poverty, can help educate students with special needs, can help educate students who are

English language learners, then we can provide a model for all school districts working with students who have the same set of challenges. Working collaboratively to share best practices across our districts, to highlight the ways in which we are advocating for all students, helping each student meet her/his full potential—that's the way we work at scale with our members.

How can insights, best practices, research, etc., from the Council be disseminated to nonmembers?

Good question and an important one. We try to ensure all materials and resources we produce are publicly available to any school district. We engage with non-Council-member districts regularly throughout the year. We share insights, best practices, and research with them. A number of nonmember districts attend the Council's conferences; all are welcome. Our objective is to share the learning we've come across, learnings about what it takes to educate children that any district could benefit from. We also work with philanthropic foundations to help disseminate information across the country, not just to Council members but to nonmembers alike.

Because we're here at Harvard Business School working together on this program we have partnered together on since 2019—the Accelerating Board Capacity Institute, known as the ABC Institute—I want to hear from your standpoint why this is so

The Council of the Great City Schools

THE NATION'S VOICE FOR URBAN EDUCATION



The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) brings together a coalition of 77 of the nation's largest urban public school districts dedicated to improving the educational outcomes of their nearly 8 million inner-city students. The organization is guided by three broad goals:

- to educate all urban students to high standards;
- to lead, govern, and manage the nation's urban schools efficiently and effectively;
- to bolster public confidence in urban education.

When initially formed in 1956 by Sargent Shriver, founder of the Peace Corps who at the time was serving as president of the Chicago Board of Education, the organization was an informal networking and study group of 12 urban school districts. Today, the Council is a prominent national research and policy organization. The Council informs the nation's lawmakers, the media, and the public of the progress and the problems facing big-city schools through legislative advocacy, research and publications, conferences, and online resources. The organization also helps to build capacity in urban education with programs to raise academic performance and narrow achievement gaps; improve professional development; and strengthen leadership, governance, and management. Joint efforts with other national organizations, corporations, and government policy makers extend the Council's influence and effectiveness outside member school districts to the larger, interdependent world that will ultimately benefit from the contributions of today's urban students. Since its founding, geographic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity has typified the Council's membership. That diversity propels the coalition forward to ensure that all children receive an education that will enhance the quality of their lives and equip them with the skills and knowledge to compete successfully in the world marketplace.

The Council of the Great City Schools

- Founded 1956
- 7.84 million students supported by CGCS member district schools
- 77 of the nation's largest urban public school systems*
- 44% Hispanic
- 26% African American
- 18% White
- 7% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 1% Alaskan/Native American
- 16% English Language Learners
- 72% Eligible for Free/Reduced-price Lunch
- 16% Students with Individualized Education Programs
- 13,800 schools

*School districts eligible for membership must be located in cities with populations over 250,000 and student enrollments over 35,000. School districts located in the largest city of any state are also eligible for membership, regardless of size.

Source: Council of the Great City Schools, <https://www.cgcs.org/Page/623> (accessed September 6, 2022)

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We need to help everyone understand that increasing student outcomes for all our students means understanding the political, cultural, and societal impact that all our students face when they come to school every day.

important and why this is something the Council wanted to take a lead on.

The school district is not owned by the superintendents or the school board. The *community* owns the school district. Communities elect board members to represent their vision and their values for their district and what they want for their children. The board then sets the tone not just for the superintendent, who is their employee, but for the entire school district—how they work together, whether they collaborate or not. The board sets the expectations. When a board, for example, can deliberate in public about the challenges of what it takes to improve student achievement, about what it means to put systems in place to support student outcomes, it empowers teachers and principals to deliberate about those same sets of conversations at the school level. The board, superintendent, principals, and teachers need to work in tandem, step by step, to move the district forward, to address the needs of the families and the students in the district. When this happens, the community sees it has a group of individuals who are committed to working together to make a difference in the lives of their children. Communities can wrap their arms around that kind of leadership.

Recently, I was at a retirement celebration for a superintendent. People from the community—a diverse community of African American, Hispanic, Latino, Latina, white, urban, and suburban residents—all talked about how the superintendent brought them together to move student achievement forward collectively for the district as a whole. When she started, she wasn't from the community. She was an outsider. Over her tenure, she became a respected member of the community. It was a great thing to see. Essentially, it was that this superintendent was working with the community members, the school board, principals, and teachers, and together they were able to make a difference in the lives of children.

There is a great deal of division in America these days that has created a level of polarization within school boards and districts. What are you seeing in your districts? Does a program like the ABC Institute help school boards and districts stay focused on the mission of educating our youth?

I think quite often we lose sight of what Covey calls the “Wildly Important Goal (WIG)” and get caught up in what Covey calls the whirlwind—the vortex of small things swirling around us that swallow us.¹ It's not that the politics are not important—they're critical. It's not that the state of society is not important—it's critical. But I think one of the things that this program and others like it have the possibility of doing is helping our school board members and superintendents focus on the Wildly Important Goal: *school districts exist to educate our children*. When we get caught up in some of the other things that are in the whirlwind, we tend to lose sight of that Wildly Important Goal, at a detriment to our children.

There's just so much noise, right?

A lot of noise. We need to help individuals come back to why school districts exist. And we need to help everyone understand that increasing student outcomes for all our students means understanding the political, cultural, and societal impact that all our students face when they come to school every day. Some of our students come to school hungry; others come to school having not had the best experience at home the night before. Believing we can educate that child despite these situations, rather than viewing these as reasons we can't achieve our goal, is what we need to embrace. The ABC Institute and supports we provide throughout the year to superintendents and school boards seek to keep district leaders focused on student outcomes.

¹ Sean Covey, et al., “Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important,” Franklin-Covey, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://www.franklincovey.com/the-4-disciplines/discipline-1-wildly-important/>.



What are the critical or emergent issues or challenges facing your member districts?

The issues of today are very similar to the issues of a decade ago. We've just had different names for them. Our students who have returned to in-school learning post-pandemic have social, emotional, and learning needs that speak to things that are happening in their lives personally. These existed before—we called it character education before, or other names. Those underlying things that help our children become better individuals as they grow and move through our school system, those things have remained fundamentally the same. That said, today our kids live in a world where access to information is instantaneous. Social media presents new challenges, which exacerbates some of the issues. But it doesn't mean that the problems are different now than they were a decade ago. The solutions to these issues remain constant—understanding where students are, identifying their needs, and providing appropriate supports so they can be successful.

As you take on your new role, do you think of yourself as the leader or as a steward of the Council?

Both. As leader, I can bring ideas to the table, but there's very little I'm going to do on my own. For me, it's more about how we work together to make a difference; it's going to take a team of individuals and thought-partners and people working in collaboration to move the needle and accomplish what we want. There's a great poem that

I've been sharing as I've gone around to meet with groups this summer. It's titled "The Bridge Builder."² It basically talks about an old man who walks down a path, crosses a river, and then starts to build a bridge back over the river. When someone comes by and asks why he is building a bridge when he's already on the other side, the old man explains that one day a young man is going to come behind him who will want to cross this same river. I don't know who he is or what his name is, but when he gets here, the old man says, I have built a bridge for him to get across in a way that wasn't available to me. So, people always talk about stewardship versus leadership, but for me, it's about bridge building. For me, I'm here to put in place systems and structures to build bridges for those who are coming behind me. There were bridges and supports built for me by my predecessors which have helped me get to where I am, and I want to be sure that the students, teachers, principals, and leaders that come after me can also get across the bridge.

Thank you, Ray. We look forward to the impact you will have building bridges in collaboration with your member districts. ♦

The Bridge Builder

by Will Allen Dromgoole

An old man going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening cold and gray,
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
Through which was flowing a sullen tide
The old man crossed in the twilight dim,
The sullen stream had no fear for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You are wasting your strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day,
You never again will pass this way;
You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build this bridge at evening tide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head;
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followed after me to-day
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!"

² Will Allen Dromgoole, "The Bridge Builder," in *Father: An Anthology of Verse* (EP Dutton & Company, 1931), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52702/the-bridge-builder>.