



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities
May 13, 2004

Moderator: Clifford Johnson, Executive Director
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families
National League of Cities (NLC)

Speakers:

John DeStefano Jr., Mayor, New Haven, Connecticut
Hannah Dillard, Director of the Mayor's Office of Education, Columbus, Ohio

JOHNSON: Thank you, Angela. Good morning or good afternoon, depending on where you are in the country. Thanks to all of you for joining us for this audioconference, which is roughly the 25th in a series of audioconferences that the Institute has sponsored over the last several years. We try to hold an audioconference on a monthly basis on a topic of interest to municipal leaders across the country. And today's call is focused on our recent work in municipal leadership in education.

We have the pleasure today of talking about a new Institute report entitled "Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities" that is based on a 30-month technical assistance effort led by the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families here at the National League of Cities. It involved six cities across the country: New Haven, Conn.; Columbus, Ohio; Charleston, S.C.; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Lansing, Mich.; and Portland, Ore. We have the honor today of having with us two municipal leaders from two of those six cities to talk with us about the report and about the broader questions of municipal leadership and education.

First, the Honorable John DeStefano, Jr. He is the Mayor of New Haven, Conn. John sits on the school board and appoints its members in New Haven, which is a relatively unusual governance structure compared to the common pattern across the country. John has made public education one of his top priorities and has worked tirelessly to improve education outcome for all children through the development and implementation of the New Haven Accountability Plan. Thanks very much, John, for joining us this morning.

DESTEFANO: Thanks, Cliff. Great to be here.

JOHNSON: Second, we have with us Hannah Dillard, who is the Director of the Mayor's Office of Education in Columbus, Ohio. Mayor Michael Coleman has made education his top priority in his work. When he assumed office, he designated his Education Office as a cabinet level position, and Hannah leads that office working alongside Mayor Coleman. The City of Columbus and the County of Franklin have been working to close the achievement gap in the 16 school districts throughout the region,

working in partnership with school and community leaders. We're delighted to have you with us, Hannah.

DILLARD: Thanks, Cliff. Good afternoon, everyone.

JOHNSON: Let me start by asking each of you if you buy the premise of this report, if you in some literal sense believe the title, "Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities." Do you see that connection there? And if so, where and why do you believe that's true? John, can you start?

DESTEFANO: Sure. You know, listen, I remember from the time I first ran for mayor many years ago, going, knocking on doors and just becoming apparent to me that when people were choosing to move out of New Haven, oftentimes it was when they were facing where they were going to send their kids to kindergarten and where they were going to send them to high school and whether they felt that the city offered a positive choice for their kids. Frankly, if we weren't offering a positive choice, they were getting out of town. So in terms of maintaining tax base, in terms of maintaining diverse neighborhoods, I just saw from knocking on doors that people would move out when they were facing those times for the kids.

I'll tell you, I have two boys. My youngest guy is graduating from one of our high schools this year. I feel good about the experience both my kids had growing up from kindergarten through high school in New Haven. I remember back when I was going to make a choice where to go to high school growing up in New Haven. It was in 1969. My dad was a cop in New Haven. My parents weren't about to send me to the public schools in New Haven in 1969. In fact, when I would have had to go, the Black Panthers were organizing the school at the time. It was a different, changing kind of time in America. Public schools forced a lot of folks out of our city then and continued to do so for a long time. Having good schools is essential to growing families here, and I think it's essential for developing a competitive workforce.

JOHNSON: John, do you think most people, most voters, most community leaders in New Haven believe that?

DESTEFANO: You know, what I love is -- it's a little different here because I do appoint the School Board. It's part of the city budget. What I like is in our elections here-- in the Mayor's race-- school issues play a central role in the Mayor's race. We have a lot of magnets and a lot of inter-district magnets where kids from about 23 surrounding communities go to school in New Haven. You know, this debate of community versus neighborhood schools versus whether we're doing a good job or not are vigorously contested in the Mayor's race. Are we spending enough? Are we not spending enough? Are we spending too much on construction or not?

And I think it's good that it plays a role in the Mayor's race because it establishes accountability. From accountability comes the sense that people control their destinies. So I think citizens get really engaged about it. I think oftentimes organizing those kinds of issues as contested issues in a Mayor's race is really cool because it creates a place for the community to engage and have a civil discussion.

JOHNSON: Hannah, how about down in Columbus, Ohio? Do people believe this?

DILLARD: I think people believe it. I think our circumstances are different obviously because the Mayor does not have any authority or governing powers over our school districts. In our city, we have 14 districts, Columbus Public Schools being the largest. However, I think his realization that the strong schools do make strong communities became part of what his platform issues were when he ran for Mayor in 2000. And I think that it was the first time here in Columbus that a mayor had actually spoken out about the state of education, the purpose of education, and the reasons for having a strong education system within the city.

It was a surprise to a lot of folks. I think a lot of folks-- in the beginning of this campaign--thought that it was just a campaign and that there really wasn't a commitment to education. I think we found over the four years that he has been in office and the Office of Education established that indeed the commitment is there. And what we have been able to do is to raise the awareness of education and the issues around educating our children to this population here in the City of Columbus.

As a result, we have an engaged population. We always have in terms of those parents who have children in school. We have a large older population in Columbus that really are disengaged from the school districts because they no longer have children in school. And so we've had to work with that particular group to get them engaged and get them familiar with the kinds of issues that are out there for our students.

JOHNSON: Because if those folks don't believe that stronger cities mean stronger schools, then you're in trouble, right? Because otherwise within a typical city, one in five families have school age kids.

DILLARD: That's correct. And for us, that is a large voting population for school levies and for other issues. But what we've also been able to do -- the District did pass a bond issue last November for a \$350 million revitalization/rebuilding/renovation of school buildings. Our focus on that is making these buildings neighborhood centers and focuses in our community. What we found is that this particular concept is attracting more folks to the issues of education because they see these new schools partnering with other agencies and organizations in the city and beginning to rebuild some of the neighborhoods that really have gone astray. So, it's almost a revitalization in thought as well it is in actual structure.

DESTEFANO: You know, what's worth noting is Columbus and New Haven have very different models of governance, right, Hannah? And I think the thing that we both share -- and I think the report speaks to this -- is that a mayor and elected officials, no matter what kind of governance structure -- and God knows, the town lines -- we don't have counties. You guys have counties -- no matter what the system is, by saying these things are important, by spending resources and spending our time talking about these things in public could really yield big dividends for our communities and leverage other folks' participation. So whether it's like me and you appoint or whether it's like some other communities where you don't appoint the school board, no matter how the lines are

drawn around these things, we in public office have microphones. And people do pay attention –

DILLARD: -- That's correct. That's correct.

DESTEFANO: -- right, to what we talk about. That's the cool thing: focusing on this stuff leverages and yields outcomes.

DILLARD: That's right. I think it's important -- mayors -- these are mayors' cities. And the school districts are within these cities and therefore there is some sense of responsibility to making sure that the education is as much of a priority as our streets and our drains and sewers and those other infrastructures.

DESTEFANO: Because the funny thing is, right, you've got the President of the United States talking about education. And I would tell you that the federal government has far less to do with what goes on in our local public schools than do our mayors and local elected officials. And you know, there is clearly something to be learned from President Bush's saying that this is important. Frankly, it elevates the issue and can help drive it. And that's a lesson to be seen from No Child Left Behind. It has very little to do in the final analysis with the quality of kids' education. But the power of the office is just that. It's a power and it ought to be used here.

DILLARD: Exactly.

JOHNSON: Let me pause for our listeners and draw your attention -- the report that we're discussing is called "Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities," and it's posted on the NLC website. So if you go to www.nlc.org/iyef -- for Institute for Youth, Education, and Families -- you'll see the Institute's homepage on the NLC website, and there is an entry about today's audioconference. You can download the report and browse through it a bit as we talk, if you'd like to do that.

The first lesson in that report focuses on vigorous and sustained mayoral leadership, the notion that if you stay with something, if you're in it for the long haul and you're vigorous about it as a city leader, that pays big dividends. John, what does it mean for you in New Haven to be in it for the long haul? Obviously a mayor in New Haven is always going to be in it to the extent that it's part of the city budget and you're appointing school board members, but there are certainly different levels of energy. And my sense is you brought a whole new level of energy compared to some of your predecessors in earlier eras in New Haven. What does it mean to be vigorous and how does it change your thinking if you realize that you're in it for the long haul?

DESTEFANO: Well, you know, with education constituencies who themselves are vigorous and care about their schools and sometimes suspicious of elected officials when we get involved, a big part of being in it for the long haul is being transparent about my intentions. And I think a lot of times when issues or debates about control come up -- Mayor Tony Williams in Washington, D.C, just recently, when he was trying to get greater authority over the school district. You know, a lot of it comes into play in "Why

are you trying to do this? Is this about who gets appointed to jobs? Is this about patronage? What's it about?" And you know, what I found useful is to very clearly articulate what I'm concerned about. I'm concerned about outcomes, and I'm concerned about focusing on a series of initiatives that the public can understand, that are limited in scope and don't try to micromanage the school district to any unreasonable extent.

So for me, sustaining involvement has meant being there, going to school board meetings -- while I'm a member of every board and commission in the city, that's the only one I attend on a regular basis. Putting money there each and every year, even during what have been difficult budget years for Connecticut, like a lot of places over the last three years. And being just that -- transparent about intentions and motivations.

Look, we can all agree on the fact that we want kids to be able to learn. We care about academic achievement. And we as elected officials are willing to stand up and be held accountable for what we do. I don't try -- I think it's important, like most things, to not try to do everything. And I think it's always important, particularly with the school board and with the leadership in the district and with teachers' unions and parents to attempt to develop personal relationships. And probably like a lot of people listening in, I'm not always successful in those things. But you try.

JOHNSON: Well, there are strong echoes for you, Hannah, I'm sure in Columbus listening to what John has just said. I know that questions about intentions were front and center for Mayor Coleman as he got started down this road and was much in our mind when we highlighted a second lesson in this report, which is that the debates and fears around changes in school governance can quickly derail your school improvement efforts. I think it would be wonderful if you'd give our listeners a sense of how that played out in Columbus.

DILLARD: Well, I think you're right in your assessment, Cliff, and I need to echo the Mayor's comment about transparency. Mayor Coleman when he took office was very transparent up front about his intentions, and they have always been that he was not interested in taking control of the school system. That was not his intent and it had to be said so many times in so many different ways --

DESTEFANO: -- Over and over again.

DILLARD: -- that's right -- for people to get the message. And I think part of the hesitancy on the part of our folks here to accept that "Let's wait and see what's really going to happen, and is there really not going to be take over." Because there was that in the air at the time because our school district was in academic emergency, which was the lowest rung of grades here. The State was thinking, you know, a continued lack of progress, there would be some sort of action taken. And then the Mayor at that point was stepping in, saying that education was one of his major issues. So there was a lot of concern about taking over. And of course, in our city that would not have been well received. We have a strong group of folks who support our elected school board, and it's almost a right. It's felt that we should have this sort of school governance at this point in time.

And so it was a period of, early on, trying to just say so many times that

this is not a takeover, but it is a support. It is something we want to support in collaboration with the districts as well as other organizations to make sure we are educating the kids the best way we can.

I think the issue on sustainability, though, is a little different for us than it is with the Mayor in New Haven, and that is if indeed Mayor Coleman is not in office going forward after whatever terms that he chooses, there is no guarantee that this particular initiative or office will move forward. So what we're wrestling with is how do we sustain not necessarily my office, but at least the focus on education. And it's my sense that we've done a lot of good work, put forth a lot of collaborative efforts and new initiatives, and demonstrated the need for a mayoral concern in education that hopefully the next mayor will understand that the community expects going forward. But we really don't have the infrastructure in place to just sustain the office or the focus on education as you would have in New Haven.

DESTEFANO: Well, actually, you know, we don't. Even though we do, we don't, and I'll tell you why. Because in point of fact, my predecessor, who also appointed the school board and also was a member of the school board, was sued by his appointees over school funding. (laughter) And actually the day before I took office, the City was ordered by State Court to invest a bunch more money in local education.

I think in the final analysis in any public policy, you can't guarantee that there will continue to be vigorous investments and shared vision. And at least institutions, I'll tell you, don't guarantee it, and I think we're proof of that. Even though you appoint them doesn't mean you're all going to see eye to eye. I think the way you do guarantee, or to the extent you can, try to encourage this is to make public schools and strong schools and things like early childhood education, which I think is related, important values for the community -- shared values of the community. And the way you do that -- see, I'm a politician. I run for office. You literally go out and sell this stuff and you get people to buy into it and you get the business community and the institutional community to buy into these kinds of values. You get your citizens to buy into your values. And that's the best you can do. It's a hard enough job to deliver outcomes today, and you can build sensitivities. And the best way you can is by showing success and showing that these partnerships leverage good outcomes.

JOHNSON: It seems like if you're consistent about that and you stick with it for whatever term you have or terms you have, you do create a climate of expectations that makes it harder for the next person in that office to walk away.

DILLARD: That's correct.

DESTEFANO: And it's like Hannah says, there is pride in the elected school board. When you make something successful, people will generally want to be part of it and continue it. But again, the most precious thing elected officials have is their word. And when you're true to your word, and when you go out and you talk about stuff and pick what you talk about, you make a difference.

JOHNSON: Both of you have talked a little bit about personal relationships and also

about institutional capacity, which are two themes that we focus on in the lessons learned in this “Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities” report. Hannah, I know from our early experience working with you in Columbus that the personal relationship and the trust that existed and that the Mayor built upon with the School Board President and the School Superintendent was very important early on.

DILLARD: It was very important, and frankly I think what we have here right now are all the stars being aligned at the same time. The School Superintendent, the Board of Education President, and the Mayor have been friends for years. And even when our Mayor was President of City Council, he was very much involved with the two of them in other kinds of activities and initiatives in the community. The Mayor and the Superintendent are neighbors, so they are able to bring that relationship to the arena of education and it has been extremely helpful in moving forward an education agenda, both for the Mayor as well as it has been for the Superintendent and the Board of Education President.

It’s my sense, though, that, as a result of participation at my level, I have been able to strengthen those relationships institutionally across the boundaries between the City of Columbus and the school district and school system itself. So since the top has a sense of relationship that’s very personal, I’ve been able to institutionalize some of these relationships at the operational level that I think really has strengthened the entire framework of how we move forward.

DESTEFANO: And I think obviously personal relationships, but I’ll say a word about power. I think what’s important in any relationship is knowing its boundaries, but also letting people push back. I mean, I have strong ideas about what ought to happen in the public schools in New Haven. But I also understand that the superintendents and community organizations within the school district count. The funny thing about power for us in elected office is it’s not just exercising ourselves on folks. It’s letting folks exercise themselves on us sometimes, if you get my point -- letting them push back and frankly being advocates for their concerns and their issues and sometimes even changing our minds, because God knows it rarely happens, but we can occasionally be wrong about something.(laughter)

So I think a big part of having a relationship is being willing to let others push back on you. And in an area like public schools, because it’s their kids, you know, they care passionately about this stuff. What’s more important in families’ lives than their kids and the promise that comes from getting a good public school education or not, or the consequences of not getting it? It’s letting people push back at you and letting them sometimes have their way. That’s a good relationship.

JOHNSON: And John, on the institutional capacity question, you obviously have your direct relationship and lines of authority and whatever with the Superintendent. But are there people in your city departments who have some liaison responsibility with their counterparts on the school board?

DESTEFANO: There are clear levels of interaction, not only with places like the Police Department and the Health Department and workforce areas of the government

that interact with kids. What you also encourage is -- you know, in New Haven, Yale University is our major employer and one of our largest taxpayers. And frankly, those kinds of institutional relationships are important, and they don't exist just sort of unilaterally between one or the other. Jim Comer, who is at the Yale Child Studies Center, is a pretty well known guy nationally and is a pretty good guy about this accountability stuff and school performance.

It's not just the school district's relationship. I have a relationship with Jim Comer. And oftentimes when we talk about education, the Superintendent of Schools is not just there with Dr. Comer, but I'm there as well. And that sends a not-so-subtle message that the city is concerned about it and we're engaged in it and that I think it's important for Yale to be involved in these issues. So there are lots of subtle and not-so-indirect ways to send messages that, hey, Yale, this is important for you to be involved in.

It's easy for me to send that message to my Police Chief since I appoint him and he serves at my pleasure. But for those that don't -- I mean, there are a lot of people that don't serve at my pleasure in New Haven. (laughter) Most of them, I serve at their pleasure. You know, there are other ways to do it. And again, it's spending time and saying it's important.

JOHNSON: One of the things we often hear here at the Institute as concerns from smaller cities and towns across the country that don't have capacity to do this -- "Oh, yes, I'd love to be involved in education, but we don't have sizeable staff in the Mayor's office. How are we ever going to do this?" And it struck us over time that you can think about this question of capacity in many different ways and in many different levels. So it may be at the level of what capacity you have within the Mayor's office to build the relationships and the kind of investment that Mayor Coleman has made in his Mayor's Office of Education is a great example of that.

But you also can look at whatever city staff and agency capacity you have. If you have a park and rec department of some sort where there is a staff person that can be tied to this, if you have someone in the health agency or some other city agency that's doing youth related work, there are different places to build bridges. And then of course at the citizen level, you can do that, too. So it seems important to recognize that this capacity issue is there and it's real, but not to get stuck on it.

DESTEFANO: You know, there are lots of ways to do this. All of us have demands on our time. And it goes back to whether you really believe the title of the report, that stronger schools get you stronger communities. There are lots of ways to figure out how to do it.

DILLARD: And I would say, Cliff, that a lot of city governments are already providing hard support to their school districts that the citizens may not even be aware of. We conducted an audit of all of our departments early on in 2000 and found that each department in its own way was delivering services to the school district, whether it's through the police, the school resource officers, whether it was in-kind in terms of adopt-a-school. In some way, each and every department was doing something in education. But it didn't have a central home. And I think part of what we've been able to do is to

take education and spread it throughout each of the departments so that now if indeed there are streets that need to be repaved, we've been able to prioritize the schools that need to have the sidewalks and the equipment that goes with the flashing signs and that kind of thing addressed. And so what I'm saying is that districts and schools and cities are probably already doing this in their own ways, that if they could really focus in on what that support is and help their citizens know that indeed they are probably much more of a support to the district than I think probably most citizens really know.

JOHNSON: That's a great point, Hannah. And every city has some sort of policy around schools and student achievement. They might not realize what they're doing, but they're already in this business almost certainly one way or the other. And the question is whether they're in it with a purpose.

Let me point out for our listeners again, this "Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities" report is available on the NLC website, www.nlc.org/iyef. And if you're listening and have a specific question you'd like me to try and inject into this conversation, you can send me an e-mail at Cjohnson@nlc.org, and I'll try and work that into our conversation.

Lesson number four in our report is about city resources. And the question really goes to the point of whether this is all talk but no money, no resources, and how does a city really convince its school partners that there is value added with the city being at the table? Our impression as we have worked with the six cities is that there has to be some answer to that question. As Hannah just pointed out, when they bring resources to the table, they are viewed as a more credible partner. Hannah, was there a threshold for you as the Mayor tried to position himself in a leadership role, a place where folks in the school world have come to the city and said, "Okay, it's time to put up or shut up"?

DILLARD: Well, I think that the threshold is the very beginning, again, trying to "prove the commitment to education" on the part of the Mayor. And one of the first things, as I said, we did was an audit. And we were able to identify the fact that in a year's period of time prior -- in 1999 -- we supported the school district to the tune of \$15 million just in dollars that are spent in each of the departments, not focused in any kind of way, but in some way had been working in cooperation and collaboration with the school districts to provide particular services. Once they were able to see that in fact there was a relationship between the school district and the city, I think prior to that everyone had always seemed to think they were two different tracks, that they never meet, that there is no correlation between the two. That it really wasn't apparent to folks that there is a really strong connection and interfacing between city government and a school system. And I think that was one of the first realizations that came to light.

The other kind of resources that we've been able to do since then was to really focus the general fund dollars and CDBG dollars towards the development of a citywide afterschool program. That is one of the initiatives that we have been able to really address here in the city and to attract funds other than city funds. But the fact that the city has focused general fund dollars to that particular purpose has also added to our credibility in the educational arena.

DESTEFANO: You know, it's a factor of what you do and how you do it. In New Haven, we made a commitment early on to rebuild physical plants, and over the course of 12 years, we'll spend about one and a quarter billion dollars. And we're going to rebuild. We've got 45 buildings. We will have rebuilt every building and gone from about three and a half million to four and a half million square feet. And the buildings -- a lot of them are pretty ratty and it made sense. But it was also a way for neighborhoods to see -- I mean, it was a political choice in some ways, too, for neighborhoods to see the actual investment of city dollars going into the school buildings, that these were valued institutions in the community. And we wanted to send that message. And occasionally that message ignites a political debate that we don't spend enough money on staff as we should because we're all into and about buildings. But it was actually a consciously calculated political choice to show investment by investing in buildings.

Having said that, there are lots of places to demonstrate support. We spend a lot of time in the school district and the city determining what we're going to lobby the state legislature for and frankly coordinating our efforts to deliver outcomes for school funding in appropriate places. We spend a lot of time collaborating together to go after places like foundations for funding in places like NLC. And anybody listening should go after NLC for funding and technical support in figuring out how to do this. But going together to places to leverage resources. You just find a lot of times when the superintendent of schools and the mayor are in the room asking for something, the whole of our efforts is more than just the sum of the two of us. We get a lot more done when we're on the same page asking for the same thing and have thought about what we're looking to do.

JOHNSON: And then how, John, do you figure out both for yourself, but also for your voters when you're making those kinds of investments -- how do you figure out what return you're getting on your investments? How do you think about using data in particular and outcome measures and benchmarks to try and assess progress over time so you can build the case that folks are getting their money's worth?

DESTEFANO: I have one of the lowest performing school districts in the state measured by state standardized tests. And a lot of that has to do with how Connecticut is zoned and how people are permitted to, and not to, live in communities. And we engage that debate very frequently about how you measure. And we talk about state standardized tests. We talk about what's happening with dropout rates and we talk about who is matriculating into two and four-year schools and who's not. And we talk about how many kids come into school district or not. But fundamentally we continuously seek to find measures that are acceptable to various publics about what is good performance.

We've just gone through a whole accountability initiative to design accountability, not just for the mayor and the superintendent and the school board, but for faculty, for parents, for community-based institutions as well, since we all feel we're all responsible for outcomes in these schools and we all have a role to play. And part of this is because I'm married to a kindergarten teacher who feels in kindergarten she does too much testing. Most of my teachers have very strong feelings that we're doing too much testing, and there are lots of different ways to measure outcomes. And frankly, one of the ways we have sought to present -- you know, as we get people engaged who have

credibility in the community in determining what the outcomes are, agreeing before we start measuring what the outcomes the community wants to have should be. And then we go about measuring them.

JOHNSON: Hannah, I know when you folks in Columbus sharpened your focus on the achievement gap, not only on the central school district, but in the suburban school districts throughout the region, you used data in a very strategic way and had an interesting partnership with Battelle for Kids, a statewide group, right?

Battelle for Kids is a partnership initiative focused on improving student achievement in Ohio by supporting, accelerating and sustaining standards-based reform. The partnership works to strengthen support from the business community and the general public for an education system focused on student achievement. For information visit <http://www.ohea.org/publicEducation/learners/improving/battelle.aspx>

DILLARD: We did. That was a really risky initiative for the Mayor's office to take because we typically have not delved into the academic portion of running the school district. We have tried to stay clear of that, however we walked that fine line.

So what the Mayor finally ended up doing was setting some expectations for what kids should be able to do and to know upon graduation to be able to be productive in the community, whether they wanted to stay here and work, whether they wanted to go on to one of our community colleges, our technical colleges and/or four-year colleges. So backing down from that and starting at the beginning of that entire process, we were able to then work with all 14 school districts around their achievement gaps.

Now in Columbus, we have one major school district, which is the urban school district of 64,000 children. And then the suburban districts -- obviously smaller, higher income school districts. But we chose not to focus on the urban district and make it the center of all of our discontent. So what we did was to collaborate with Battelle for Kids, another group in the county called the Education Council, which is a consortium of these 14 school districts. We were able to get from our State Department of Education the achievement scores over the earlier year's achievement tests for every school building in the county. We rolled that data up into a CD, made it available to every school person in the county -- the superintendents, their teachers as well. Then we brought them all together to take a good look at that data and look at the achievement gaps in each of their districts, and let's talk about how we go about beginning to impact those gaps.

Education Council is an outgrowth of an agreement between Columbus Public Schools and most of the other school districts in Franklin County. Its purpose is to demonstrate that school districts can work together on common issues for the benefit of the students and communities they serve. Visit www.edcouncil.org for more info.

JOHNSON: And there were some surprises there for folks, right?

DILLARD: There were some surprises there. We found that some of our highest gaps were not in the Columbus Public School System, but in one of our higher income suburban school districts. There were racial gaps, there were income gaps. But for the

first time, districts were really able to see that they were not educating all children equally.

About the same time, we found ourselves in the midst of No Child Left Behind, and we phased in the kind of data that's required for that with our data for the achievement gap. So we've just over the last two and a half years begun to work collaborating on this 14 group format to identify ways that we can do teacher development, that we can improve classroom delivery of curriculum, parent involvement. Just basically a whole cadre of initiatives as a result of this that we hope at some point in time we can demonstrate has impacted the achievement gap.

JOHNSON: So let me pose to both of you a couple of questions just in from St. Louis here. The first question is, "What are your expectations of how much improvement can take place and how fast in your school? And are your expectations different from that of the expectations of school leaders? And what about the difference in expectation between you and people out in the community?"

DESTEFANO: From my point of view, in some way your expectations should always exceed what you believe in your gut is possible. I think it's important to challenge yourself and to challenge the community to do well. And you know, I don't have a problem setting very aggressive goals and coming up short sometimes. I think that's okay.

I think once you get past the issues of why you're doing this, in most cases, school leaders are pretty good about going along with this as long as you put yourself on the line with them and hold yourself accountable. And oftentimes that means putting funding -- at least for me -- putting funding on the table for folks to do this and involve the unions and other constituencies that have interests that are slightly different. And they are just that -- they're different -- in setting some of these goals and expectations.

And my feeling about the public in my experience, I should say, is as long as you're straight with the public, they understand what you're trying to do, you explain what you're trying to do and explain sometimes you don't hit the mark, the public goes along with what you're trying to do and gives you a chance to succeed.

JOHNSON: And there is some balancing act there. I assume if you set a wildly ambitious goal and you get only a quarter of the way there, that's not only a political liability for you, but a potential downer for the community in terms of building momentum.

DESTEFANO: Look, in the abstract, I always find people's goals are very aggressive. It is often interesting to me that people will set very aggressive goals for the district. But when it comes to holding perhaps their teacher or their school accountable, I find parents are not so aggressive when they get it back to their school. In the abstract, they're a lot tougher than they are when it's the individual.

I don't know, Cliff. I think to not have very aggressive goals sends the wrong message. I mean, I can speak to realities about -- we all can -- single-parent households, English as a second language, high transient rates among attendants at

schools, kids arriving at kindergarten with very small vocabularies and social skills. And in the end, you're still going to have high expectations for these kids.

JOHNSON: Sure. And in a different context, three weeks ago out in Portland, Oregon, we were having our "Your City's Families" conference that the Institute sponsored. And our opening panel included the City Manager from San Jose, where Mayor Ron Gonzalez has been doing lots of impressive stuff on education. And one of the things the City Manager said was that he has learned that mayors are -- and again, it goes back to this question of the megaphone that you were talking about, John. Mayors have an ability to set some goals that people at first might gasp and catch their breath, say "How could we ever do that?" But pretty quickly, his experience in San Jose has been even goals that seem wildly ambitious, people pretty quickly turn their attention from the goal to "How do we do this?"

The conference was sponsored by The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families of the National League of Cities in collaboration with the City of Portland, the League of Oregon Cities, and the Coalition for Community Schools. Visit www.nlc.org/iyef for a report on this conference.

DESTEFANO: Yes, and you know what the biggest goal is? The biggest goal is getting municipal leaders over the hump that education is indeed something they ought to be concerned with.

DILLARD: I agree with that.

DESTEFANO: That's the biggest thing. Put a flag down and say, "You know what? This is important. I care about it and we're going to do something about it." And I think that's the biggest deal here.

DILLARD: I would agree with that. I think that the idea of drawing a line in the sand around "Education is my issue as a mayor" is a major ingredient in helping the community understand that they themselves need to become more engaged and familiar with their school district.

DESTEFANO: I remember once -- I used to work for city government before I became the Mayor. I was at a public meeting and someone asked the Mayor who I was working for, about a problem in public housing. And he said, "That's not me. That's the housing authority." I almost fell out of my chair because I knew politically it wasn't true, and I was a little disappointed in my guy that he would say that.

I think if you're a local elected official -- people -- I mean, hey look, they expect you to solve everything, man. "What are you doing about the price of gasoline right now? And milk?" I mean, "What are you doing about it?"

JOHNSON: That's our next audioconference, John. (laughter)

DESTEFANO: You know, gasoline -- I'm not going to build a refinery. But in point of fact, these schools are in our neighborhoods. These are our kids. Come on, we all

know we can do something about it. And we can. We should. And it should be great, what we do.

JOHNSON: Hannah, have you seen in Columbus at least some appreciation that large changes, large improvements in student achievements takes some time? And conversely, have you encountered this expectations problem or struggle?

DILLARD: I think that one demonstration that we are improving is that we are no longer in academic emergency. We've moved up and –

DESTEFANO: -- See that sounds serious -- academic emergency? Is that an Ohio thing?

DILLARD: That's an Ohio thing. That's our state report card. And we were the lowest grade that you can get, which was "academic emergency." And we've now moved up to "academic watch." And it's the sense of the Superintendent we'll be out of academic watch next year. So there is a sense of hope in this community that the school district is on a different track from what it has been over the past years. And I think along with being able to see that change in report card and then to see hope goes up, we're able to get a different spirit within the community around the issues of education.

I think probably the expectation issue has been difficult in terms of trying to align all of the expectations. The business community has a set of expectations. Parents do. Just general citizens have an expectation. There are a range of expectations in the community for education and all of them, each expectation warrants a set of actions on the part of the district. I think one of the things we've been able to do is to align those expectations so that folks are applying pressure across the board, but they can apply the kinds of pressure in a focused way that helps the district then focus their activities to begin to keep the improvement going. It's just that a series of different expectations from different parts of the community that's been a difficult issue to deal with in the past.

JOHNSON: I remember early on in your work watching the leadership mantle be seized the way that John was just talking about, as the Superintendent, with the Mayor's support, said early on, "We're going to get out of academic emergency, and we're going to do that quickly" in a timeframe that a lot of people thought maybe wasn't that realistic.

DILLARD: Much too vigorous -- but it happened.

JOHNSON: But it happened. It's a real leadership story. We have only a couple of minutes left. I want to make sure we talk for a few minutes about these questions of community partners and public engagement. Because I think all of us would agree that cities need to be involved, mayors and other city leaders have a key leadership role. Schools are obviously in this business, but even best case scenario, city and school folk alone can't do this. It needs to be a community-wide effort and campaign to really change levels of student achievement. John, thoughts about how that has played out in New Haven, what you think has worked out well? What has been a continuing struggle in that regard?

DESTEFANO: Well, I'll tell you what I think is the job of elected officials, which is to sell a message that we're all going to be better served, no matter what we're doing, when we invest in one another and when we see mutual interests in helping each other achieve the limits of the possibilities that God gave each of us. And I mean, that sounds like a little bit of a high message -- I don't know. But I think this idea of what elected officials are uniquely positioned to do is connect people and institutions to one another. We tend to be everybody's elected official. I am constantly reminded that sooner or later, everybody in New Haven comes through my office and wants something. And it gives me a great opportunity to remind them how they're connected to one another. And I think oftentimes, we who are in elected office get to see everybody. You know, you do see everybody and all their strengths and shortcomings.

And in point of fact, kids are a great way to engage folk. People do feel hopeful and a sense of possibility about the future because when you deal with kids, you do -- at least I feel better, more so than when I deal with most adults. (laughter) And so it's a great way, I think, to connect to people, to one another, and, frankly, to develop a community spirit. I mean, my God, we spend so much time in some of our communities, particularly our larger ones, worrying about getting the ball team a new home or building the next hotel and convention center. And I'll tell you, I don't think that's how you build strong families. It's around these institutions. It's around kids. And I think there is great public spirit and public values to be promoted around kids and engaging communities around kids.

JOHNSON: Hannah, a closing thought on that front?

DILLARD: Well, I would agree with the Mayor. I think that probably transparency on the part of the mayor and city government to its citizens around motivation for being involved in education is key. I think making sure that the citizens always get adequate and accurate information about what's going on, and that the information that's out there is real and it's true. I think they need to feel included, having some say in what new school buildings are going to look like, what new resources are going to be housed in these school buildings. And I think all of that put forth on the part of the mayor helps build a sense of inclusion that therefore I think triggers engagement on the part of the folks in the community.

JOHNSON: John, Hannah, thanks so much for being with us today, taking the time to do this. I really appreciate it.

DESTEFANO: Thanks, Cliff. Hannah, good talking to you.

DILLARD: Good talking with you, too, Mayor. Thanks, Cliff.

JOHNSON: For listeners, let me point out hard copies of "Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities" can be obtained either by sending an e-mail to the Institute at iyef@nlc.org or by calling 202-626-3014 and leaving a message requesting the report. We would be delighted to send you copies.

Our next in the series of audioconferences sponsored by the Institute is scheduled for June 10. The same as today's call, it will begin at 12:30 Eastern time. The topic will be Challenges and Opportunities of Municipal Assistance in Afterschool Programs -- so a closely related topic. I hope you'll join us then as well. Thanks to all of you for listening today, and have a great day.