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## Municipal Leadership in Education Yields Results

by Audrey M. Hutchinson

In most American cities and towns, education is not viewed as a municipal responsibility.

But local elected officials around the country are demonstrating that local governments can make a positive difference in improving schools, and not necessarily by exerting greater administrative control over the educational system.

They know that successful schools contribute to community quality of life, economic development and a strong citizenry.

And they recognize that with education reforms placing schools and communities under increasing pressure to improve student performance, mayors and other local officials are uniquely positioned to strengthen community capacity and public will to address key education challenges.

Whether or not local officials have formal authority for schools and education in their communities, more and more of them have moved to exert a stronger role in public schools. For most, working in partnership with school and community leaders gives them and their communities the best opportunity to ensure that all children have a chance to succeed.

As one mayor said, “My job is to ensure the future of our city, and the best way to do that is to ensure the education of our children.”

### *Roles for Municipal Leaders*

Mayors and councilmembers have an opportunity — and a platform — to use their leadership positions to promote a community-wide approach for improving schools.

As visible, respected leaders of the community, they can:

- Set the public’s agenda and articulate the city’s vision to reach consensus around specific goals for school improvement.
- Facilitate ongoing communications with school district leaders to build trusting relationships, lay the groundwork for collaboration and minimize “turf” issues.
- Bring community partners together — including business, community and faith-based organizations and others — to assess progress regarding school improvement and to leverage their resources to support schools.
- Remove obstacles to achievement by using city resources to help children and youth maximize their learning potential, address health and

social services needs and enhance student safety.

- Build public will by engaging parents and community residents, using public forums and media outreach to raise critical issues.
- Encourage the use of data to tell stories the public can understand and to target resources to address the greatest needs.
- Bolster the quality of teaching by supporting teacher recruitment efforts, including affordable housing options and other financial incentives.
- Advocate for equitable school funding to invest in high-quality teachers, instructional resources and facilities.
- Create after school programs to reinforce student learning and to provide safe havens and enrichment opportunities during non-school hours.
- Turn schools into centers of community life by keeping schools open beyond traditional school hours, developing joint-use agreements to reduce costs and creating learning opportunities for families and the community.

Why would a mayor without authority over the school system want to take on the challenge of education?

Because stronger schools lead to stronger cities.



Students are reaping the benefits their schools offer when municipal leaders become involved in education./Photodisc

### *About the Municipal Leadership In Education Project*

Six cities — Charleston, S.C.; Columbus, Ohio; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Lansing, Mich.; New Haven, Conn.; and Portland, Ore. — recently concluded their participation in a 30-month technical assistance initiative — the Municipal Leadership in Education Project — led by NLC’s Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, with financial support from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This NCW Special Report briefly summarizes their stories and the findings from the MLE project.

The goals of the MLE project were to support and assist local communities; illustrate the leadership roles

that mayors and councilmembers can play — and are playing — to promote and support school improvement; and identify promising practices in municipal leadership and school improvement for mayors and councilmembers who are interested in strengthening K-12 education.

Through site visits, regular conference calls, meetings, bringing in experts and other activities, YEF Institute staff provided intensive, ongoing support to these teams as they developed and implemented action plans for strengthening K-12 education tailored to meet each city’s specific circumstances and needs.

Teams from each city included municipal officials, school board members, school administrators, teachers, parents, business leaders, representatives of community and faith-based organizations and other civic leaders.

The cities focused on different education challenges, including:

- Persistent achievement gaps by race/ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status;
- Low achievement levels of middle school students;
- Inequities and inadequacy in school funding;
- Problems related to teacher quality and retention; and
- Lack of public confidence and insufficient connections between communities and public schools.

Detailed stories and lessons learned from the MLE project were released recently by NLC in a report, “Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities.”

This report profiles each city’s work on the project and highlights strategies used to stimulate and support progress in strengthening public schools. The “Stronger Schools, Stronger Cities” report is available in the publications section at [www.nlc.org/iyef](http://www.nlc.org/iyef) or by contacting NLC at 202-626-3014 or [iyef@nlc.org](mailto:iyef@nlc.org).

# City Stories From the Municipal Leadership in Education Project

Despite challenges, the six cities in the Municipal Leadership in Education project made important strides in improving education for children and youth.

They faced budget deficits, leadership changes, and other challenges in their efforts to strengthen education in their communities.

Here are their stories briefly summarizing their experiences.

## Charleston, S. C.

Charleston is a community of just over 100,000, with a student population in the Charleston County School District of over 40,000.

2002 achievement statistics showed that one-third of eighth graders scored below basic on reading standards and that 16 percent of school children repeated first, second or third grade.

In response to these statistics and a general dissatisfaction among residents toward the educational system, the City of Charleston decided to launch a collaborative effort to reconnect the community to its public schools.

As Mayor Joseph Riley said in a State of the City address:

“The challenge of educating our children is the single most important issue facing our community, and this is a battle we cannot and will not lose. We must increasingly find ways for us, the citizens of our community, to connect with our children and let them know that we know they are our most important asset.”

### *A Partnership Takes Hold*

Mayor Riley and a prominent business leader established a leadership team of key community stakeholders from education, business, faith-based organizations and neighborhoods.

The leadership team explored a range of public engagement strategies and options. YEF Institute staff met with the leadership team to discuss its vision for public education, and connected them to national experts on school reform and public engagement.

To kick-off its public engagement strategy, Charleston's team held a community forum.

Following the forum, the leadership team organized 14

community sector meetings over the course of several months with the business community, teachers, faith-based leaders, parents, senior citizens, service providers, volunteers and youth.

Participants in the conversations identified a number of ways in which the community could reconnect with local schools: adopt-a-school programs; reading, tutoring, mentoring, after school and Saturday activities; identifying successful programs and providing added support for teachers and scholarships.

### *Moving Forward With New Investments*

Charleston's renewed commitment to school improvement was demonstrated in the summer of 2003, when budget cuts prompted the Charleston County School District to cut its summer school program. In response, the City of Charleston and Communities in Schools organized a volunteer tutor/mentoring program called S.O.S., or “Summer of Success, Supporting Our Students.”

More than 300 volunteers were trained and placed at S.O.S. school sites throughout Charleston County.

Local businesses encouraged employees to take part in the effort and helped raise money to support it. In addition, community-based organizations and other agencies donated products and services such as books, field trips, t-shirts, snacks for students and gift coupons for volunteers.

Charleston is committed to building on these activities with a series of initiatives that will occur on an ongoing basis.

“We have witnessed a major change, and the community's connection to schools has certainly strengthened,” said Jacquie Kennedy, director of the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth, and Families.

## Columbus, Ohio

Columbus has over 700,000 people and is home to 16 public school districts. Mayor Michael Coleman is spearheading a collaborative effort there focused on closing persistent achievement gaps among students from different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Elected in 1999, Mayor Coleman made improving education a top priority for his

administration — even though the city has no governing authority over public schools. He established the city's first Office of Education, and charged this cabinet-level office with developing ways to work in partnership with the school districts in the city.

“I have a moral obligation and community expectation to engage school districts,” said Mayor Coleman.

### *High Expectations*

At the beginning of the NLC MLE project, Mayor Coleman met with his Education Advisory Commission, the Superintendent of Columbus Public Schools, the school board President and YEF Institute staff to discuss options and strategies for moving forward.

Subsequent discussions with school and community leaders identified pervasive achievement gaps as a key concern.

After these sessions, Mayor Coleman organized an education summit to launch a long-term effort to close the achievement gap.

The summit was a partnership of the city, Columbus Public Schools and the Educational Council, an organization representing the 16 school district superintendents in the area. The summit attracted more than 200 participants, including university faculty, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, state and city government administrators and nationally recognized experts.

“Even though we are from separate jurisdictions, education is everybody's business,” Mayor Coleman told the group. “And it will take a renewed partnership between schools, businesses, communities and families to bridge the gaps that have developed and are continuing to grow.”

### *An Action Plan and Road Map*

One of the key outcomes of the summit was an action plan and road map laying out the following objectives for the city and its schools:

- Sharing promising practices.
- Developing common data collection and analysis strategies.
- Providing targeted professional development opportunities

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## *Lessons Learned*

There are several lessons for mayors and councilmembers about what works — and what does not — in using municipal leadership to strengthen and support public schools.

### **1. Vigorous and sustained mayoral leadership yields big dividends.**

Mayors are in a unique position to use their leadership mandate and political clout to galvanize the community for improving public schools, command public attention, spotlight successful gains and, at the same time, confront critical challenges.

They can also bring diverse stakeholders to the table and encourage community partners to build on the assets of the community and use their resources to enhance the school district's efforts.

The personal involvement of mayors makes a difference, creating a sense of urgency that opens up opportunities for sustained change with the potential to raise student achievement.

### **2. Contentious debates or fears regarding changes in school governance can quickly derail school improvement efforts.**

Mayoral leadership in education can be the catalyst for community-wide school improvement efforts. However, because education often is not viewed as a “city” responsibility, a mayor's interest in the issue can arouse suspicion or even alarm among school board members, school district officials and community leaders.

City leaders need to address governance issues at the outset, being clear about how and why they are getting involved in an issue that has not typically been part of municipal governance.

### **3. Strong city-school district partnerships depend on both personal relationships and institutional capacity.**

Regular communication between city and school leaders — such as standard meetings of the mayor and superintendent, each official assigning a senior staff person to be the liaison between their respective offices, mayoral and superintendent partnering on specific initiatives and finding opportunities for the mayor and superintendent to make public appearances together in support of schools — can go a long way toward overcoming turf battles, identifying problems before they become unmanageable and opening the door to coordinated efforts that respond to the needs of schools and their students.

These and other strategies to institutionalize cooperation and coordination help to bridge the gap between city hall, elected school boards, school administrators and other community stakeholders.

### **4. A commitment of city resources toward education builds trust and goodwill and enables schools to overcome barriers to student achievement.**

Cities are in a position to contribute valuable resources — from human to financial — that can build capacity to improve public schools.

However, once the city is involved — whether the contribution is leadership or money — the expectation is often that an infusion of city dollars will follow.

Cities must therefore decide early in the process what they are willing to invest; if it is not money, they must consider how to leverage other resources — such as access to state, federal and private dollars; transportation; shared facilities; or other city services.

### **5. Well-focused data analysis build consensus and support to ensure that all children — regardless of their racial, ethnic and**

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### economic backgrounds —have a chance to succeed.

Data about local schools and education outcomes for students are essential and powerful tools that can help community stakeholders take a fresh look at what is working well in schools, and what challenges remain.

With good data in hand, the community can make informed decisions based on objective information and use it to reach consensus around a shared vision and benchmarks of progress. Elected leaders also can seek local resident input by holding public forums, conducting surveys and convening focus groups aimed at building a citywide consensus around school improvement.

Carefully analyzed and disaggregated data can be particularly valuable in assessing issues of equity and opportunity related to funding, teacher quality, facilities and other areas, providing a clearer view of disparities across schools and among groups of students from different racial, ethnic, income and language backgrounds.

### 6. The involvement of business, faith-based and other community leaders can enhance the credibility and the effectiveness of joint city-school district initiatives.

Providing a high-quality education for every child is a community-wide responsibility.

Business leaders and other community stakeholders are natural partners in efforts to improve education and help students develop to their full potential. The presence of business and other leaders brings credibility, political clout, knowledge, expertise and resources that help support city-school district efforts and build public confidence.

These leaders have a vested interest in student success.

Sometimes, the secret to getting these potential partners involved is simply to ask.

### 7. Ongoing public engagement is essential to the sustainability of school improvement efforts.

Strengthening education requires close cooperation of city and town officials with school officials, business and community leaders and other stakeholders.

And it requires strong support from the public — parents, students and other residents who must be convinced that the schools need improving, and that better schools will benefit the entire community.

Through speeches, media appearances, interviews, summits, public forums and other activities, municipal officials can focus their communities' attention on student achievement and other education priorities, highlight successes and raise challenges for the future.

The common element across all of these approaches is a determination to build support for solutions — and recognition that improving schools is a job for everyone.

### 8. There is no substitute for a community-wide plan that defines clear goals and holds city leaders, school officials and other key stakeholders accountable for results.

Municipal leaders can promote a sense of shared accountability by creating a community vision for education and developing a school improvement plan that is publicly embraced by residents and key stakeholders.

Mayors can bring together leaders from diverse sectors and work in partnership with school district officials to advance community-wide progress for schools.

There are no quick fixes for lasting change.

However, as the six MLE cities demonstrate, educators and municipal officials must work together to support the academic success of students, with municipal leaders playing a pivotal role in crafting and implementing broader accountability, including the civic capacity to sustain the effort over time.

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ties for teachers and other school officials.

- Increasing advocacy, as well as community understanding about the achievement gaps in Franklin County.

- Expanding out-of-school learning opportunities for youth.

In adopting these broad goals, the City of Columbus and its partners made a commitment to a long-term partnership.

"It can't be a one-time event," said Superintendent Harris. "I anticipate that as long as the mayor is around, we will continue to look at these issues. But it has to be an ongoing discussion."

### *Moving Forward*

An important accomplishment came when local voters approved a \$700 million bond proposal to rebuild the city's schools — a proposal advanced by Columbus Public Schools with the active support of Mayor Coleman.

"The mayor was a true partner and worked hard to engage the business community in supporting and financing the bond campaign," said Stephanie Hightower, the school board president.

In 2004, after a second summit in 2003, participants remain hard at work and committed to implementing the goals and objectives adopted at those summits.

In one key indication of progress, the Ohio Department of Education removed the school district from "academic emergency" designation under the state's assessment system.

### **Fort Lauderdale, Fla.**

Fort Lauderdale is a city of over 150,000 people, managed by a city manager and commission. More than 30,000 students attend the public schools, which are part of the Broward County school district serving over 270,000 students.

The City of Fort Lauderdale viewed the YEF Institute's MLE project as an opportunity to undertake a coordinated public engagement strategy to improve education. The city's goal: to increase citizens' awareness about the roles they can play in assuring a high-quality education for students.

### *Developing a Plan of Action*

In the mid-1990s, the City of

Fort Lauderdale established the Education Advisory Board (EAB), a panel of 20 community residents appointed by the city commission.

The EAB acts as a conduit for the interests and concerns of parents, educators and advocates for the public schools.

With assistance from the YEF Institute and input from school district officials and community organizations, the Fort Lauderdale leadership team organized its engagement initiative around three components:

1. Inform citizens through public awareness and training initiatives. By helping Fort Lauderdale residents better understand the organization and operation of the Broward County public school system, the team's goal is to foster more meaningful public participation in the schools.

2. Engage residents through the use of "study circles." Fort Lauderdale engaged residents in small group discussions designed to elicit their thoughts, ideas and concerns about public schools and the roles that the city and individuals can play to ensure quality educational opportunities.

3. Mobilize the community to develop a plan of action. Once the study circles are completed, the city hopes to hold a community action forum to prioritize issues and develop goals and an action plan.

### *Moving Forward*

Frank Till, superintendent of Broward County Public Schools, credits the MLE project with breaking down barriers.

"From a school perspective, we are seeing more people involved in schools, and more attention at the business level through the Chamber of Commerce

"It's really brought us together in partnership with the City of Fort Lauderdale. Because we are now in the same room, we can have a common discussion," he said

"Overall, I'm very excited about what we've started," concluded former City Manager Floyd Johnson. "The MLE project represented a real break with the local tradition of staying out of the other jurisdiction's business.

"It's a new way of thinking for our city leaders," Johnson continued. "Activities and discussions related to education issues are becoming part of day-to-day business."

## **Lansing, Michigan**

Lansing is a community of almost 120,000 residents. Sixty percent of its 17,600 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch because of their socio-economic status.

Confronted by a growing dropout rate and low achievement among middle school students, the City of Lansing led an initiative aimed at improving the educational outcomes of students in the middle grades. With reading as a core strategy, the Lansing initiative targets four areas:

- Student achievement
- Attendance
- Behavior
- Parental involvement.

### *Reaching Out, Setting a Course*

The mayor's leadership team for the project included a broad range of community stakeholders: the school superintendent, school board president, principals, teachers, business leaders, representatives of local organizations serving youth and members of the university community.

The team established four broad goals:

- Motivating and engaging students and community members to read;
- Increasing parents' awareness about the importance of daily student attendance;
- Distributing literacy information to parents and encouraging them to read with their children at home; and
- Developing a clear understanding of research-based best practices on reading, as well as sharing and demonstrating best practices in the classroom.

### *Working in Partnership*

These goals guided the work of the team in addressing each priority area.

During a two-day summit focused on student achievement, more than 600 educators — together with city council representatives, parents, business leaders and the media — discussed the needs of young adolescents, the importance of reading, ways to address achievement gaps and the use of data to identify gaps and develop strategies.

"This large gathering of school and community leaders was a remarkable event," said Jack Davis, president of the school board. "We focused on a

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## Leadership Keys

School reform is enhanced by various forms of leadership and is greatly improved when cities rely on a variety of champions. Throughout the course of the Municipal Leaders in Education initiative, three areas of leadership were key to the success of the project:

- Leadership from the business community,
- City and school joint leadership and
- Community leadership.
- Charleston involved business leaders to bolster credibility.
- Portland increased public support for key investments via the mayor's "bully pulpit."
- Columbus used data analysis to build consensus and focus the agenda.
- Lansing focused on a high priority but "doable" agenda.
- New Haven engaged university-based experts from the city and region to inform debates.
- Fort Lauderdale used the new initiative to improve lines of communication with the school district.
- Charleston sought ways to build upon early victories.
- Columbus addressed community concerns head-on regarding perceived "hidden agendas."
- Fort Lauderdale created a network of study circles to support public engagement.
- Portland sought broad input and responded quickly to changing circumstances.
- Lansing built upon prior education initiatives and leadership by the mayor.
- New Haven utilized governance roles to ensure city-school coordination.
- Lansing weathered mayoral transition due to the strength of a broad-based coalition.
- Columbus translated solid relationships with key stakeholders into a shared agenda.

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total community analysis of middle school issues and engaged in very important dialogue."

Recognizing the link between behavior problems in the classroom and poor reading skills, the team also is spearheading efforts to increase the reading skills of students.

An after school program was begun that focused on reading for middle grade students, and the local public transit agency is working to provide transportation for students in the program.

"Often, kids who are poor readers tend to miss school or act out in class; these students would rather be seen as someone with a behavior problem than as someone with a reading problem," said Sam Davis, a middle school principal.

To address attendance issues, Lansing established a parent notification system using volunteers to call parents whose children were absent from school. If the students' absences persist, students and their parents are referred to truancy court, where they face a municipal judge and possible sanctions ranging from probation to incarceration.

### The Community That Reads Together

Under a new mayor, Tony Benavides, the city partnered with Lansing Public Schools to launch a literacy campaign — One Book, One Community — to promote reading among middle school students by having the entire community reading the same book at the same time.

Teachers developed themes and activities around the selected book. The city and the school system shared the cost of purchasing hundreds of copies of the book. Mayor Benavides held a press conference and appeared on radio and TV talk shows. And the city sponsored a conference for parents.

Businesses, bookstores, libraries, police and fire stations and the utility company all became involved in the campaign.

"The One Book, One Community campaign made learning to read a team effort," said Mayor Benavides. "Community support really allowed the campaign to flourish."

### New Haven, Conn.

New Haven, with a population of 130,000, is led by a mayor who

is a member of the school board and appoints all school board members. The public schools have almost 20,000 students.

Mayor John DeStefano, Jr. and other members of the local leadership team used the MLE project to explore how the city and school district can ensure that all students have equitable resources and educational opportunities, as well as what key stakeholders can do to support education.

The local leadership team began its work with the YEF Institute by establishing a mission and vision to guide the project.

### Shared Accountability

DeStefano appointed a 27-member committee that developed an accountability plan — adopted by the school board in 2002 — which lays out a clear set of principles for improving education:

- Set clear expectations for performance and apply them consistently;
- Focus on student growth in addition to point-in-time performance;
- Use valid and reliable indicators in all accountability;
- Recognize shared responsibility for student success; and
- Reward and recognize success and impose sanctions for failure.

Responsibilities and performance expectations are outlined across six stakeholder groups: the central office and district; individual schools; principals and school leaders; teachers and instructional staff; students; and parents.

The accountability plan also recognizes the importance of the larger community in helping students achieve academic success.

### Engaging the Community

With the accountability plan as the basis for action, the New Haven leadership team conducted focus groups with parents, businesses, community residents and educators to get their feedback on the accountability plan.

Its outreach effort included the development of tools that define how each stakeholder group can support student success, and a major campaign to bring parents into the schools.

One result: more than 7,000 parents signed pledge cards, committing to set aside time to help their kids complete homework assignments.

Mayor DeStefano also convened an education summit where members of the business

community pledged to sponsor internships, mentoring programs, scholarships and other activities.

"At the beginning, people would say, 'Why does the mayor have us here?' The atmosphere has now changed," said School Superintendent Reginald Mayo.

"The benefit of the project has been to bring people together in a planned way to see that they should be working together and that there are things they can do," said Dr. James Comer of Yale University. "We have a community that's interested, but we've never had a way to involve the community in a systematic way."

### Portland, Oregon

Portland has a population of 660,000 people. It has five public school districts that serve over 50,000 students.

Through the MLE project, the City of Portland initially set out to enhance local efforts in closing persistent achievement gaps of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and build public confidence in the public school system.

However, a funding crisis caused Portland leaders to shift their attention — as well as the focus of the project — to ensuring the fiscal stability of Portland Public Schools.

### Financial Crisis for Portland Schools

A series of statewide measures and initiatives in the 1990's limited property tax revenue for education and redistributed existing dollars in a way that seriously reduced funding for some of Portland's districts.

In addition, a recession resulted in reduced state income tax revenues, resulting in serious budget shortfalls.

By the spring of 2003, Portland Public Schools were confronting a \$57 million deficit and faced a strike by the teacher's union over health benefits.

In response to these problems, the Portland leadership team used YEF Institute staff and resources to help think through a set of options for addressing the funding crisis and reach out to national experts who provided ideas for action, such as:

- State legislation allowing the city to pursue its own local solution;
- Legislation to amend the city charter to allow local funds to flow to the schools;
- A new car license tax or highway tax; and

- A new regional tax.

YEF Institute staff also conducted research to learn about communities that had adopted tax measures with a built-in accountability framework.

### Progress from Collaboration

Armed with the new information and options to consider, the mayor's education advocate convened a broad coalition to develop a local school financing strategy and plan. The coalition included the leadership team, school district leaders, city commissioners, the Oregon Business Council and the Portland Business Alliance.

The first success was averting a teachers' strike and an impending cut of 24 school days from the school year.

To achieve some financial stability, the coalition decided to place on the ballot a county-wide tax measure to fund schools, public safety and human services.

Supporting the measure were parent activists, the Portland Business Alliance, unions, religious leaders and a coalition of city, county and school leaders.

As a result of this broad-based effort, the measure received the support of 58 percent of voters. It will generate \$90 million annually in personal income tax revenues over three years for eight school districts, including Portland Public Schools.

"It's a very good example of how city, county and school district leaders can work together," said Jim Scherzinger, superintendent of the Portland Public Schools.

To ensure that the new monies are well spent, the new tax measure requires school districts to communicate with local residents about student achievement and the use of the new public funds.

A new advisory council, appointed by Mayor Vera Katz and the county chair in consultation with the city council and board of county commissioners, will review expenditures and monitor the district's progress on student achievement and cost containment.

Portland's solution to the funding crisis, albeit temporary, opens the door to a more wide-ranging discussion of how to strengthen and protect public schools.

"Other cities can now look to Portland and say, 'If they can do it so can we!' We took advantage of the opportunities and feel that Portland became a model for other communities," said Katz.