

# Partnership Is a Two-Way Street: What It Takes for Business to Help Drive School Reform

Frederick M. Hess and Whitney Downs



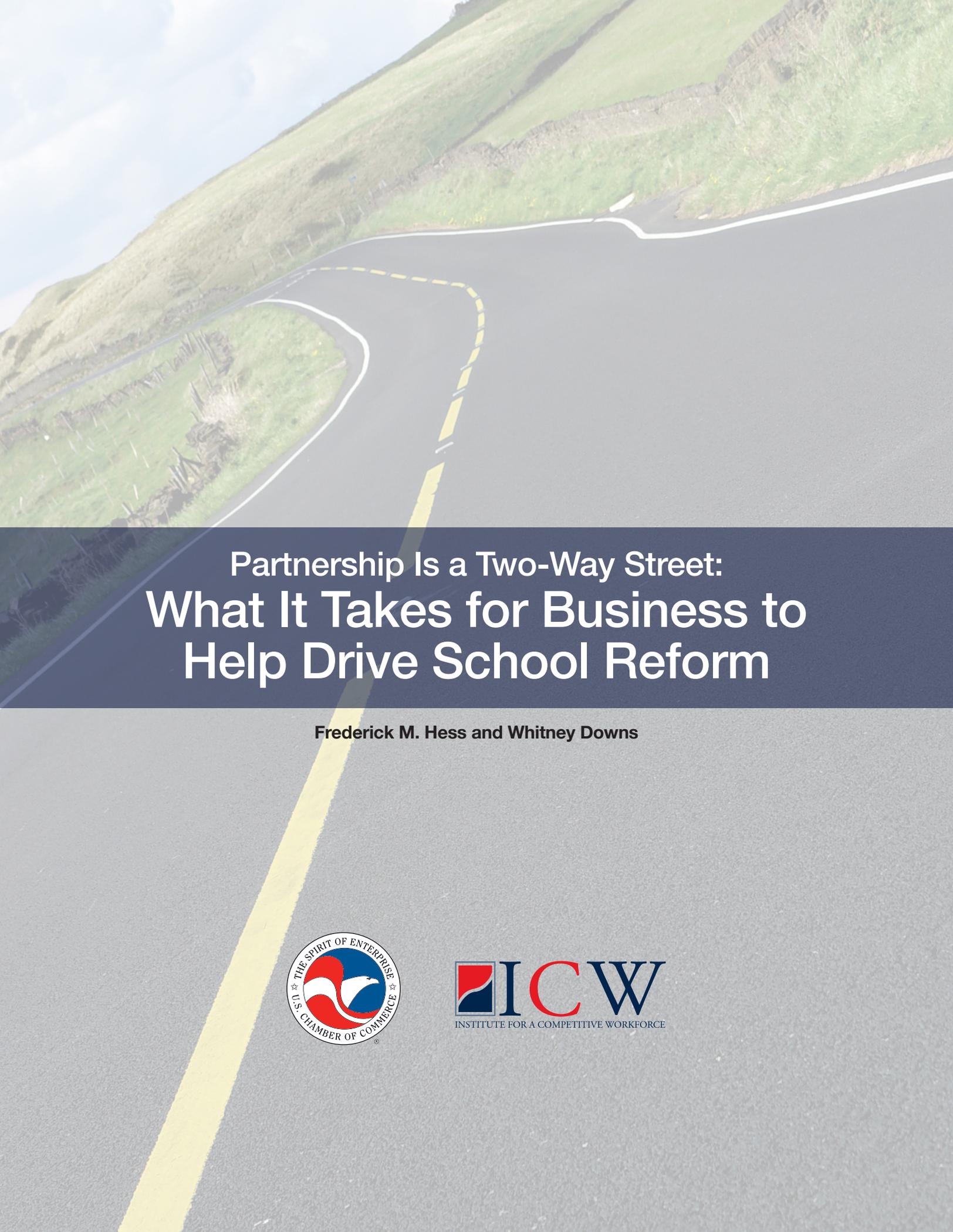


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# Executive Summary

American K–12 schooling is in need of transformative improvement, and business can play a valuable role in retooling school systems for the new century. Business can provide the leverage, expertise, and leadership that will help educators and public officials make tough decisions and take hard steps they may not take on their own.

The challenge is how to do this well. Business leaders who want to make a difference are often steered to “model cities,” where tales of collaboration dominate the conversation. But they may not realize that these successful efforts are the product of tumultuous, hard-nosed endeavors—and that what they are seeing is the calm that follows the storm.

Too often, business has put its good intentions to work in the service of ineffectual systems. While volunteer tutoring and college scholarships are beneficial, this kind of involvement will not power the transformative change needed to significantly increase student achievement. If business leaders are serious about school improvement, they must play a more forceful role and drive harder bargains with state officials and school district educators. They must insist that in return for their support, educators will use new resources and tools

to transform—not merely subsidize—public education in the United States.

## Three Approaches

What kind of business involvement does it take to truly make a difference in the education arena? Business can function as a critical customer, a partner, or a policy advocate.

In Austin, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce has worked tirelessly with the area’s 15 independent school districts to raise college enrollment rates. Recognizing the need to cultivate homegrown talent capable of performing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, Austin’s Chamber has played the role of critical customer, wielding its market position to promote quality. As tough, independent consumers, the Chamber’s business leaders are helping the school districts achieve their college enrollment goals by providing transparent data, expertise, and sustained pressure to do better. The result: a dramatic increase in the number of Austin-area high school seniors applying to and enrolling in college, with 64% submitting the Texas Common Application in 2009, up from 47% in 2006. The Austin Chamber’s push to increase Free Applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSAs) has also yielded dramatic gains: FAFSA submissions were up 85% from 2006 to 2010, resulting in an additional \$43 million in financial aid to the Central Texas region.

In some cases, smaller learning communities are just another fad, but Nashville has shown that they can produce results when they are done right with the business community as a committed partner. Currently, Nashville has 117 business-academy partnerships, as well as six industry-based partnership councils composed of 22–25 high-level business leaders who meet once a month. The result: the city’s graduation rate rose from 69% in 2006 to 83% in 2010, while the suspension rate declined over 25%. The percentage of high schools in “good standing” under No Child Left Behind rose from 41% in

the 2007–08 school year to 53% in 2009–10. In February 2011, the Ford Motor Company Fund named Nashville a “Next Generation Learning (NGL)” hub—one of seven locales certified to offer professional development and guidance to districts considering Ford’s NGL model.

The Massachusetts business community, working through the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), has played the role of policy advocate, helping sort through tough policy decisions and craft legislative solutions that meet the needs of business. MBAE has shown an unwavering commitment to state education reform efforts for more than two decades; it has earned a seat at the table when it comes to policy decisions that will affect students. Recently, MBAE played a critical role in commissioning research that led Massachusetts policymakers to embrace the Common Core curricular standards, a thorny issue freighted with national overtones.

### Keys to Making a Difference

In each case, the business community has embraced a distinctive strategy to tackle local challenges. Despite the variations in approach, some common themes emerged. Across the locales, five key elements of bold business leadership are evident:

- **Be a partner, not a pawn.** Partnership is a two-way street. Working with school districts or policymakers doesn’t mean carrying their water; it means settling on shared objectives and pursuing them jointly. Drew Scheberle, senior vice president of education and talent development for the Austin Chamber, said, “We had to have the moment when [Austin Independent School District] knew we were willing to walk away. We gave them a list of non-negotiables [and] said, ‘If you want [our support], then you have to do these things. If you don’t, we’re out.’”
- **Leverage the unique assets business brings.** When business leaders work with state and school district officials on K–12 schooling, they need to keep in mind that they are negotiating not as claimants but as valued partners. Jay Steele, associate superintendent of high schools for Metro Nashville Public Schools, said, “[Businesses] are organizing their lobbyists around things we have asked. They can get a lot of things done as business people that I can’t.”
- **Get in for the long haul.** Businesses often have other priorities besides K–12 education, so it is vital to structure a role that allows business to sustain its involvement and not permit the effort to be an enthusiasm that comes and goes. Alan Macdonald, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, said, “There’s a tendency of business folks to say, ‘Didn’t we already do that?’ The fact that MBAE would bring us all together and keep us focused is very important.”
- **Learn the issues and hire an expert point person.** Business leaders can sometimes be either unduly impressed by educational jargon and fads or too quick to dismiss practical challenges and educational expertise. Neither approach gets results. Effective engagement requires that local business leaders invest time and energy to become acquainted with the issues and the local stakeholders. They should hire an expert who knows the ins and outs of education policy and can leverage the strengths of business to drive improvement. Mark Williams, Austin Independent School District (ISD) school board chair and former Dell executive, said, “Sometimes chambers sit on the side and [occasionally] jump in. When it comes to school districts, you have to have a relationship. You can’t weigh in [periodically].”

• **Don't shy away from policy and politics.** Business leaders have a natural inclination to stay out of heated education debates. But school systems are public agencies spending public dollars to serve the public's children. Serious reform requires changing policy, and that means political debate. Linda Noonan, executive director of MBAE, said, "In one community, [local business leaders] asked, 'What would the superintendent think?' when we approached them about a policy change. The answer should be, 'Who cares?'...[T]he value of an external partner is to provide cover, outside perspective, [and] pressure."

Leaders in Austin, Nashville, and Massachusetts stepped up and made a big difference in K-12 schooling. In each case, business leaders talked seriously and bluntly with educators. They recruited respected experts to lead the reform efforts. They built sustainable structures, brought top-level executives to the table, and stayed engaged. They tackled tough questions, understood that some steps would be political and unpopular, and took the heat when there was pushback.

In communities across America, business leaders recognize that K-12 schooling can and must do better. With the right approach, transformational change is possible. It's time for business leaders to roll up their sleeves and get to it.



# Introduction

Business leaders who are interested in K–12 school improvement often visit reform meccas and see strong, collaborative relationships among the civic leadership, the corporate community, and local educators. But when they head home and get to work, they often encounter obstacles, opposition, and frustration.

Many observers and would-be reformers make the common mistake of imagining that the peaceful, productive collaboration they see in some of the nation’s most promising school systems has been there all along. They don’t realize that this collaboration is the product of difficult and often tumultuous work—that they are observing the calm that follows the storm. The collaborators themselves contribute to this misperception, preferring to let bygones be bygones and showcase the cooperative, forward-looking equilibrium they have established.

It’s good to be nice. In high-performing organizations, pleasant relations typically permeate daily routines, taking the edge off creative differences and nurturing a shared sense of ownership. However, as business leaders know, if you head into a troubled firm with the attitude that your most important job is to be nice, you may not get very far. The

goodwill appropriate for a team on which everyone is pulling in the same direction is far different from the steely resolve needed to bring coherence to a fractured team.

And American education is fractured. In its inaugural 2007 *Leaders and Laggards* report, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said this:

It has been nearly a quarter century since the seminal report *A Nation at Risk* was issued in 1983. Since that time, a knowledge-based economy has emerged, the Internet has reshaped commerce and communication, exemplars of creative commerce like Microsoft, eBay, and Southwest Airlines have revolutionized the way we live, and the global economy has undergone wrenching change. Throughout that period, education spending has steadily increased and rafts of well-intentioned school reforms have come and gone. But student achievement has remained stagnant, and our K–12 schools have stayed remarkably unchanged—preserving, as if in amber, the routines, culture, and operations of an obsolete 1930s manufacturing plant.<sup>1</sup>

Changing this culture requires bold leadership. Tom Donohue, president of the U.S. Chamber, declared at the launch of a report card on American schooling, “For too long, the business community has been willing to leave education to the politicians and the educators—standing aside and contenting itself with offers of money, support, and goodwill. Not anymore.”<sup>2</sup> Our nation has tripled after-inflation school spending in the past four decades and leads the world in per pupil outlays, but the results are middling at best. We sorely lack a commonsense perspective.

In an effort to be good corporate citizens, business leaders typically involve their companies in local schools by partnering

with education officials, backing bond issues, arranging for employees to work as mentors, providing money for scholarships, and supplying goods and services to schools. These admirable efforts benefit many students, but they do not create the transformative change required to significantly raise student achievement. The problem is the system itself.

When it comes to taxes, regulation, transportation, and economic development, business leaders do not hesitate to act on the basis of tough-minded analysis. It's time to bring that pragmatism to education. In this report, we look at three business communities that have done just that: Austin, Texas; Nashville, Tennessee; and the state of Massachusetts. They have tackled different issues (see sidebar, "Context for the Three Cases" on page 9), but the common thread is a no-nonsense commitment that has helped profoundly alter three K-12 systems. That commitment—which began with a willingness to wade into the tough issues and a dedication to understanding the practical challenges—has enabled the three

business communities to forge trusting, cordial, win-win relationships with local educators.

Each example illustrates the savvy pursuit of a particular strategy to promote educational improvement. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to these strategies as *critical customer*, *partner*, and *policy advocate*.

Austin is a powerful example of a business community taking a tough posture with local independent school districts. The Austin Chamber of Commerce quarterback's the strategic provision of resources and support and leads sophisticated efforts to hold districts' feet to the fire with a pioneering report card and a firm commitment to weighing in on political issues and questions of funding.

If the Austin Chamber's approach is especially well-suited to a city with many districts, Nashville's coalition of businesses has taken the point in a partnership with the countywide school system of 76,000 students. Since the 1990s, when the Ford Motor Company began to share



Eva Maria Garza-Nyer, Austin ISD Project ADVANCE college counselor, assists a family with financial aid forms at a Chamber Financial Aid Saturday event. (Photo Courtesy of R&M Studios)

## Context for the Three Cases

Austin Independent School District (ISD) and the 14 surrounding districts serve almost all (93%) of the nearly 250,000 public school students in metropolitan Austin. Austin ISD, the largest district, enrolls 85,000 students on 122 campuses.<sup>1</sup> Seventy-four percent of Austin ISD's students are nonwhite, almost two thirds are economically disadvantaged, and nearly one third are English language learners.<sup>2</sup> The district's 2010–11 net operating budget was \$716 million, or about \$8,316 per pupil.<sup>3</sup> Austin ISD is governed by a nine-member board of trustees, elected to four-year terms. Superintendent Meria Carstarphen took the helm in July 2009. In 2009, 75% of Austin ISD's economically disadvantaged students graduated in four years, up from 66% in 2006.<sup>4</sup> With a 2010 average total score of 1514, Austin ISD students outperformed their state and national peers on the SAT. In 2010, 109 of Austin ISD's 115 schools (95%) made adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind.<sup>5</sup>

The Metropolitan Nashville Public School system (MNPS) was created in 1963 by the consolidation of the Nashville City and Davidson County school systems. With more than 76,000 students, MNPS is the nation's 48th largest school district.<sup>6</sup> Sixty-two percent of MNPS students are black or Hispanic, and nearly 70% are economically disadvantaged. The district spent \$10,777 per pupil in the 2009–10 school year.<sup>7</sup> The average teacher salary, including benefits, is \$63,600.<sup>8</sup> MNPS is governed by a nine-member board of education,

with members elected by local districts to four-year terms. Superintendent Jesse Register was hired in January 2009 to take over the district, which had been identified as in need of "corrective action" under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In 2010, the district's graduation rate was 83%.<sup>9</sup> In 2010, 60% of MNPS students in grades 9–12 tested proficient in reading/language, and 39% tested proficient in math. That same year, 66 out of 133 MNPS schools (50%) were in "good standing" under NCLB.<sup>10</sup>

Massachusetts enrolls more than 955,000 students in 392 school districts. Sixty percent of the state's students are white, 15% are Hispanic, and 8% are African American.<sup>11</sup> The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is led by Commissioner Mitchell Chester, who was selected by the nine-member Massachusetts State Board of Education in 2008. Secretary of Education Paul Reville, appointed by Governor Deval Patrick in 2008, oversees the Executive Office of Education.<sup>12</sup> Average per pupil expenditure statewide was \$13,248 in 2008–09.<sup>13</sup> For the past five years, Massachusetts has led the nation in fourth and eighth grade math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress. Boston Public Schools (BPS) serves 57,000 students in 134 schools.<sup>14</sup> Nearly 80% of these students are Hispanic or African American, and 75% are eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals at school. Superintendent Carol Johnson has led BPS since 2007. In 2010, 40% of BPS students tested proficient in English/language arts, compared with 52% of students statewide. In math, 25% of BPS students tested proficient, compared with 33% statewide.<sup>15</sup>

1 Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, *2010 Education Progress Report: Austin* (Austin, TX: The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, 2011). Available at [www.austin-chamber.org/education-talent/files/ProgressReports/AISD/61360%20Austin%20FINAL-opt.pdf](http://www.austin-chamber.org/education-talent/files/ProgressReports/AISD/61360%20Austin%20FINAL-opt.pdf) (accessed April 18, 2011).

2 Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, *2010 Education Progress Report*.

3 Austin Independent School District, "Austin ISD Data 2010-2011," <http://archive.austinsisd.org/inside/factsfigures>.

4 Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, *2010 Education Progress Report*.

5 For more details about Austin school reform, see Larry Cuban's 2010 book *As Good As It Gets: What School Reform Brought to Austin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

6 Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, "2010-11 District Factsheet." Available at [www.mnps.org/AssetFactory.aspx?did=39158](http://www.mnps.org/AssetFactory.aspx?did=39158) (accessed April 18, 2011).

7 Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce Education Report Card Committee, *18<sup>th</sup> Annual Education Report Card* (Nashville, TN: Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, February 2011).

8 Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, "2010-11 District Factsheet."

9 Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce Education Report Card Committee, *18<sup>th</sup> Annual Education Report Card*.

10 Ibid.

11 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "State Profile: 2011 Enrollment Data," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00000000&orgtypecode=0&> (accessed April 18, 2011).

12 Ibid.

13 Averages computed from 2008–09 raw data published by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Available at [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state\\_report/ppx.aspx](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/ppx.aspx) (accessed April 18, 2011).

14 Boston Public Schools, "Boston Public Schools at a Glance 2010-2011." Available at [http://bostonpublicschools.org/files/BPS%20at%20a%20Glance%2010-0404\\_0.pdf](http://bostonpublicschools.org/files/BPS%20at%20a%20Glance%2010-0404_0.pdf) (accessed April 18, 2011).

15 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "District Profile: Boston MCAS Tests of Spring 2010, Percent of Students at Each Performance Level for Boston," [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/performance\\_level.aspx?linkid=32&orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/performance_level.aspx?linkid=32&orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&) (accessed April 18, 2011).

its Ford Academy of Manufacturing Science (FAMS) curriculum, the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, the PENCIL Foundation, and Alignment Nashville have cultivated substantial business-school partnerships, helped the district recruit key talent, and kept the district focused on its strategy.

The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), an established business reform group, played a crucial role in launching statewide school reform nearly two decades ago. Today, MBAE continues to protect the state's legacy of reform and push for smart policies.

In each case, the business community embraced a distinctive strategy to tackle local challenges. But despite the strategic variations, common themes are evident—each showing what it takes for business to be a force for dynamic K–12 improvement.

During winter 2010–11, we interviewed more than 50 people from the business, civic, and education communities in these three locales. We collected materials published by local business communities and school systems,

scanned reams of press coverage, and read relevant reports and evaluations. We wanted to understand exactly what the business community did in each of these cases and how it has played out while identifying strategies that could be used elsewhere. In telling the story of these locales, we highlight the obstacles they have faced, the challenges they have overcome, and the reasons for their success. What emerges is not a vision of one correct strategy but lessons that business leaders can adapt to suit their own local context and situation.

Many of the business, civic, and education leaders we talked to in Austin, Nashville, and Massachusetts said they've been fortunate to enjoy productive working relationships and to have the right people in place. We don't think these advantages were happy accidents; rather, they were the fruits of leadership, investment, engagement, and a firm belief that partnership is a two-way street. In short, the good fortune was earned through expertise, strong leadership, and a willingness to stand up and be counted. These local business leaders saw themselves as full partners, not as supplicants, and they expected local education leaders to deal with them accordingly.



The Nashville Chamber's CEO Champions meet at Antioch High School in September 2010. From left to right: Dr. Kevin Churchwell, CEO of Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt; co-chair Steve Turner, CEO of Butler's Run; co-chair Mayor Karl Dean; and Dr. Jesse Register, director of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. (Photo courtesy of Gary Layda)

Austin: Partners,  
Not Watchdogs

# Austin: Partners, Not Watchdogs

Eight years ago, Austin, Texas, found itself at the bottom of an economic landslide. In the words of Barry Mayer, president of the semiconductor manufacturer Tokyo Electron U.S. Holdings Inc. and former chair of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, “All hell broke loose.” The city’s economy, built around the technology and semiconductor sectors, was hit especially hard by 21st century globalization and the bursting of the dotcom bubble. The city was shocked by the first losses in real per capita and personal income in 15 years, as well as the slowest population growth rate and highest unemployment rate since the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Polls reported that CEO perceptions of the region were often negative or outdated.<sup>4</sup> Despite having one of the best educated populations in the nation, the city was struggling to attract businesses and to convince local employers to expand. Austin-area schools, including the Austin Independent School District (ISD) and the other 14 local systems, enrolled 220,000 pre-K through 12th grade students; only half of Austin area seniors enrolled directly in college—six percentage points behind the national average.<sup>5</sup>

The Austin Chamber of Commerce—which currently includes 2,500 business enterprises, civic organizations, education institutions, and

individuals—geared up to turn the ship around. In 2004, the Chamber hired consultants and marketing teams to help launch Opportunity Austin—a five-year program designed to increase the regional payroll by \$2.9 billion and create 72,000 new jobs. The sponsors of Opportunity Austin (the economic and community development arm of the Chamber) recognized that their priority was to develop a better educated, homegrown workforce.

The problem lay in figuring out how to make this lofty goal a reality. The Chamber spent \$216,000 (15%) of Opportunity Austin’s first-year budget in an effort to help “close the K–12 achievement gap between Anglo and minority students.”<sup>6</sup> In its 2004 annual report, the Chamber reported that it had “established a tutoring and mentoring program for at-risk students,...awarded a \$10,000 Texas Scholars scholarship,...sponsored financial aid workshops,...[and] conducted quarterly Education Roundtables.”<sup>7</sup> Though these efforts were well meant and certainly did some modest good, the Chamber quickly realized that they were far from the kinds of hard-nosed changes required to fundamentally alter the local workforce or narrow local achievement gaps. Drew Scheberle, the Chamber’s current senior vice president for education and talent development, said, “Five years ago, the strategy was to try to boil the ocean. The Chamber didn’t deliver. So what we did was step back and take a more hard-headed approach.”

## **New Sheriff in Town**

Recognizing the need to step up its economic development efforts across the board, the Chamber recruited Mike Rollins to be president. Rollins, the former president of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, brought focus and vision to the role. In addition to aggressively courting new businesses, boosting fundraising efforts, and overseeing an award-winning marketing campaign, Rollins made a key

## Lesson Learned

**“Council meetings are effective because business leaders can speak on behalf of their companies with authority. Decisions can be made more decisively, more quickly, and with a deeper range of management experience to temper appropriate recommendations.”**

—Drew Scheberle, senior vice president for education and talent development, Austin Chamber of Commerce

personnel move by hiring Drew Scheberle as senior vice president of education and talent development. A former senior education staffer in the Texas state house and interim executive director of the Center for State Scholars, Scheberle brought a keen sense of the politics of school reform, sophistication regarding policy issues, and understanding of the role of metrics (see sidebar, “Savvy Leadership Can Make a Huge Difference” on page 14). Rollins believed that a thorough knowledge of performance metrics was critical to the Chamber’s reform role, and Scheberle could provide the necessary expertise. Rollins said, “Our approach was that we found something measurable and then pumped it with PR. That’s where Drew came in. He put the data together and put the execution plan together.”

Rollins and Scheberle set out to shift the way the Chamber approached education reform issues—moving away from partnerships and scholarships and toward a model that emphasized tracking measurable, outcomes-based performance. Rollins believed the Chamber had to “translate its advocacy cheerleading role into something more goal-focused and measurable.”<sup>8</sup> He explained, “I don’t want to slight the importance of that cheerleading role, but we wanted to really affect outcomes.” Scheberle said the Chamber’s shift reflected a basic tenet of private sector management: “If a business hires a person to do a job, we want to talk

about outcomes to determine whether the job is being performed effectively. As taxpayers, we deserve to know if our money is being used to achieve a set of outcomes.”

With the new approach came a new mission. The Chamber’s education and talent development executive committee, made up of CEOs and second-level business leaders, resolved to “enhance [the] capacity of K–12 education systems to graduate academically prepared students, ensure [that] greater numbers and a broader spectrum of students graduate from postsecondary or higher education institutions, and ensure [that] effective workforce training programs exist to train or retrain residents for a continually evolving employment sector.”<sup>9</sup> Scheberle said the high-level composition of this committee was essential to drive change: “Council meetings are effective because business leaders can speak on behalf of their companies with authority. Decisions can be made more decisively, more quickly, and with a deeper range of management experience to temper appropriate recommendations.”

Out of this committee, the Chamber launched a targeted initiative, “20,010 by 2010.” Introduced at the Chamber’s State of Education conference in 2006, the goal of the program was to increase Metro Austin’s college enrollment rate by 20,010 students by the year 2010. It aimed to do so by “injecting a performance management approach into the regional college enrollment process,” Scheberle said. The practical intent was to boost the number of local residents capable of filling the increasingly technical and demanding positions offered by Austin’s business community.

### **Business Goes Back to School**

Without credibility among educational leaders, the Chamber’s amped-up efforts would have amounted to little. Building a reservoir of trust,

## Savvy Leadership Can Make a Huge Difference

You wouldn't hire someone without an accounting background to run your finance department, so why appoint someone without educational expertise, contacts, or savvy to run your education efforts? Effectively pushing educational improvement requires serious talent. This does not necessarily mean a former educator, but it does mean someone who knows the issues, challenges, and politics. In each of the three cases, the business coalitions put strong leaders in place.

Drew Scheberle had more than nine years of experience in the education policy arena before the Austin Chamber hired him as senior vice president of education and talent development. Scheberle received a master's degree from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas; his professional report was on Texas charter school performance. He held numerous positions in the policy field before coming to the Austin Chamber, including research fellow at the National Alliance of Business and the American Federation of Teachers, legislative assistant for Texas State Rep. Scott Hochberg, interim executive director for the Center for State Scholars, and director of policy development and advocacy for the Texas Business and Education Coalition.

The Nashville Chamber hired Marc Hill from the mayor's office, where he had been the special assistant for education and then the director of the Office of Children and Youth. Hill came to the Chamber's chief education officer position with more than 12 years of state and local policy experience. Before he worked for the mayor, he

was executive assistant to the Tennessee House majority leader and research analyst for the House Education Committee. Hill said, "What attracted me to the Chamber was that the leadership wasn't satisfied with the performance of the school system or its own efforts in promoting improvement. I was drawn by the opportunity to lead in a business organization that was making education its top priority. I've found that you can move more quickly, with greater latitude, flexibility, and creativity on these issues if you're working from a position of strength in the private sector."

Linda Noonan earned a master's degree in public policy from the University of Chicago and worked as a policy analyst with the U.S. government at the Transportation Systems Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After that, most of her work focused on economic development, first as state director for the National Federation of Independent Businesses in Massachusetts and then as assistant secretary for economic affairs for the state. She also had experience in international trade as executive director at the Alliance of the Commonwealth (a research and education foundation established by the Associated Industries of Massachusetts). But it was her experience as a school committee member and volunteer member of other town boards that led MBAE to recruit her for the position of executive director, which combines economic and education issues. Noonan said she was attracted to the position because "the business leaders at MBAE understand that a strong economy is totally dependent on an educated citizenry and workforce, so they are committed to improving schools and educating every child for success."

confidence, and understanding took time, but hiring Scheberle was a critical first step, according to Mark Williams, Austin ISD school board chair and former Dell executive: "You have to have a relationship with the governance of the district. Having someone like Drew at the Chamber whose job it is to be aware and in tune with what we're doing—that's critical."

Commitment was also vitally important. Charles Barnett, CEO of the Seton Family of Hospitals, said, "You have to have a long-term vision. We have to show [the education community] that it's not just about dumping money in but about making a commitment to continue funding in good and bad times, and that we are going to help for the next tens of years."

## Lesson Learned

**“The biggest challenge was getting to the common language. The business and education communities speak differently about ideas and goals. In the first few years, we wanted the same things but were speaking different languages.”**

—Roy Larson, college enrollment manager at Manor Independent School District

Business leaders and educators had to learn to speak each other’s language before they could make progress together. Barnett recalled his introduction to the world of school finance: “My first experience talking with school leaders was painful. There are bizarre rules governing how schools get financed. From a business perspective, it’s crazy. If you come from business, you have to teach folks on the education side to avoid ‘education speak’ [to collaborate productively].”

Barry Mayer, president of Tokyo Electron U.S. Holdings Inc. and former chair of the Austin Chamber, recalled the first time he asked Austin Community College—a college to which his firm had been providing funding and equipment—for progress reports. Business leaders wanted clear, straightforward reports gauging degrees earned, completion rates, and dollars spent. But community colleges serve diverse needs—some people just want to take classes, some want to transfer, some want certifications. Mayer said, “Business was asking the wrong questions for the wrong metrics. It took a little time to strike a balance.” Roy Larson, a college enrollment manager at Manor Independent School District, stressed the difficulty and importance of getting on the same page: “The biggest challenge was getting to the common language. The business and education communities speak differently about ideas and goals. In the first few years, we wanted the same things but were speaking different languages.”

Once they earned a seat at the table, business leaders were inclined to push reforms and not just measure progress. In Barnett’s words, business wanted to be “partners, not watchdogs.” Barnett said local business leaders visited various cities and “decided that we liked the partnership model better than the watchdog model. That reflects Austin...the belief that you can get more accomplished in collaborations and partnerships.” Austin ISD school board chair Mark Williams observed, “The Chamber has clearly indicated that having high-quality education is a key component to bringing business to Austin. Bringing resources to bear and having influential people appointed to education has given them credibility and buy-in.”

The Austin Chamber plays a vital role in convening key stakeholders, providing a place for business leaders, education leaders, policymakers, and other parties to swap ideas and share data. Austin ISD superintendent Meria Carstarphen explained, “There’s a sharing of information that wouldn’t happen on its own. [The Chamber provides] a warehouse of regional data that allows Austin ISD to think beyond immediate playgrounds and school sites.” Carstarphen said this collaboration was one of the things that most attracted her to Austin: “Being in a world where the Chamber helps create space for people to be innovative and creative—it opens up tons of opportunities.”

Austin’s school leaders have a Rolodex of business experts available to help with challenges such as implementing performance pay or rethinking human resources. A group of elite chief financial officers meet regularly with the CFO of Austin ISD. Ellen Wood, president of professional services firm vCFO, said, “In these meetings, we’re getting at what they’re trying to do and what we would do as business leaders if we were faced with these budgetary challenges.” The Chamber has also brought in numerous experts, including Ranjit Nair,

former director of incentive pay strategies for Bank of America, to work with Austin ISD on human resources.

Wood and Nair believed that such meetings helped business ideas gain traction with school leaders. “The director of recruiting has completely come around to the idea that they have to work on their overall HR plan and their culture,” Wood said. Nair sensed a similar shift: “In the beginning, I could tell [that] people liked what I was saying, but they didn’t understand. Recently, they’ve started asking the right questions—that was the sign that they were starting to get it.”

### **Ready, Set...Where’s the Data?**

As the Chamber and its partners pursued 20,010 by 2010, they discovered that school districts and higher education institutions lacked the capacity to generate even the most basic information. Business leaders were shocked at the dearth of transparent, real-time data, and by the fact that many schools and districts did not have anyone responsible for guiding students through the college enrollment process. Gene Austin, CEO of Convio Inc. and former chair of the Austin Chamber’s education and talent development program, described his discouragement in an op-ed piece in the *Austin Statesman*: “As a business leader, I was surprised. I was surrounded by people and organizations with clear passion, but they lacked the systems and tools to create change.”<sup>10</sup>

Collecting and managing data is an area in which business has some expertise. The Greater Austin Chamber pushed to build a real-time college enrollment data system from the ground up. Manor ISD college enrollment manager Roy Larson recalled that after meeting with Drew Scheberle, other college enrollment managers, and members of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), they realized it would be enormously helpful to know who

had already applied for college—and that the THECB had this data.

With help from her staff, Lois Hollis, a member of the THECB, developed software called the Counselor Suite that enabled counselors to pull up records for individual students and determine whether they had submitted the Texas Common Application—an application accepted by nearly all of the higher education institutions in Texas. Hollis also created a real-time system to monitor Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submission, which allowed counselors to determine whether a student had submitted a FAFSA, whether it had been accepted as complete, and whether it was under review. These two systems enabled the Chamber to publicly report on the success of schools and districts in helping their students apply to postsecondary institutions. The Chamber began publishing biweekly progress reports that ranked each school and district based on its performance.

Jesús Chávez, superintendent of Round Rock ISD, said the biweekly reports “made information that we didn’t have four years ago available. Now, we can go to the high schools that are behind, and the districts have to pay attention and make use of these reports. We can come in like a SWAT team [to the schools with low college application and enrollment rates] and ask what’s going on.” The biweekly reports were essential to Austin Superintendent Carstarphen during her first few months on the job. “When I came in, the group that had the highest quality information was the Chamber. . . . The trend data they have, and using it to help target schools that were off track, was extremely valuable to a new [superintendent] trying to put together an appropriate strategic plan.” Eventually, the Chamber helped Austin ISD implement a performance pay system for its college enrollment managers based on these numbers. Building on these efforts, in the fall of 2010 the Chamber also helped Austin ISD

secure \$62.3 million from the U.S. Department of Education—the largest Teacher Incentive Fund grant in the nation—to help scale up its incentive pay program.

Tracking college enrollment this way triggered a reaction from some teachers, counselors, and principals. Rosemary Kelly, director of guidance and counseling for Round Rock ISD, described the initial resistance: “In our district, there was pushback from counselors and lead counselors. There was some concern that we were interfering; that children and parents know what’s best for them, and that it’s inappropriate to force children to do four-year college applications.”

The enrollment managers reported that the Chamber’s backing helped overcome this resistance. “Your mama’s always going to tell you you’re pretty, and your counselor’s always going to tell you that you should go to college,” said Roy Larson. “When business is saying it, it makes it the community’s voice, not just the school’s. When it’s coming from every direction, it becomes an expectation and it becomes a given.” Kelly agreed: “Business support gave us leverage. It made college enrollment a community-wide issue for economic survival... [The rankings] give the director leverage to go back to the principal and say, ‘Look at the list—

there you are, way down there. You need to do something about that.’”

### Breaking Down Barriers

With the data push in place, the Chamber began pursuing legislative and community-based strategies to boost college application rates. The Chamber pressured colleges (such as Austin Community College) that did not accept the Texas Common Application to do so, to make it easier for students to apply. In 2006, the Chamber also started a college readiness program within Austin Partners in Education (APIE)—a program that connects more than a thousand volunteers to help coach students who are within 10% of the Texas state assessment’s “college-ready” cutoff score. In 2010, APIE had a total operating budget of nearly \$2 million; a third of the funds were provided by the Chamber, a third by Austin ISD, and the final third by corporate and private philanthropies.

One of the Chamber’s most successful efforts has been its work to boost the number of students completing FAFSA forms. Building on studies that have shown the college enrollment rate of Hispanic and first-generation students increases by 350% when those students complete FAFSAs,<sup>11</sup> Scheberle spearheaded an effort to boost FAFSA completion through

Congressman Lloyd Doggett and Gilbert Zavala, vice president of education and talent development at the Austin Chamber, visiting with a family at an Austin Chamber Financial Aid Saturday event hosted at Austin High School in March 2011. (Photo Courtesy of R&M Studios)



## Lesson Learned

**“We had to have the moment when [Austin ISD] knew we were willing to walk away. We gave them a list of non-negotiables [and] said, ‘If you want [our support], then you have to do these things. If you don’t, we’re out.’”**

—Drew Scheberle, senior vice president for education and talent development, Austin Chamber of Commerce

legislation and local programs. The Chamber worked with U.S. Congressman Lloyd Doggett to pass an amendment to the Higher Education Reauthorization Act that allows the IRS and U.S. Department of Education to pre-populate 75% of the FAFSA with IRS 1040 information. The Chamber continued to build the capacity of the real-time data system launched in the 15 districts and pushed districts to hire college enrollment managers (CEMs). In 2005, Austin ISD was the only district with CEMs, thanks to funding from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. Today, all Austin area high schools have CEMs.

The Chamber also helped Austin ISD ramp up what is now a massively successful Financial Aid Saturdays initiative. In 2005, Austin ISD hosted four financial aid events with little response. With Scheberle’s help, partners were mobilized and the initiative was publicized and scaled up throughout the city and the surrounding districts. By 2010, the Chamber was helping to host 33 Financial Aid Saturdays in 15 districts. During these events, parents and students are guided through the FAFSA application process; when they leave, their FAFSAs have been submitted and their questions about higher education financial aid answered. The success of the initiative was the result of hard work. The Chamber launched school-based and area-wide marketing campaigns to advertise the events to high school seniors and their families. Calls were made to all graduating seniors, notices were

sent home in every senior’s report card, and more than 14,000 letters were sent to parents. The campaign, which ran in English and Spanish, also featured 1,306 radio spots on 12 radio stations, nearly 3,000 public service announcements on Austin’s cable channel, more than 17,000 ads run by five cinemas on 76 movie screens, more than 33,000 Facebook impressions targeting Austin teens, and a 12-page insert in *The Statesman*, Austin’s major newspaper (see sidebar, “Serious Change Requires Serious Resources” on page 19).

Superintendent Carstarphen said the Chamber’s mobilization of partners was crucial: “The Chamber has put community muscle to [work] to help students and families navigate the red tape. Breaking the barrier for these families is essential, and the Chamber invests in people who know how to do it.”

For 2011, the Chamber has budgeted \$50,000 for radio, television, Internet, and campus marketing to promote Financial Aid Saturdays. All this activity has paid off. FAFSA submissions were up a whopping 85% in quarter one of 2010 from quarter one of 2006—from 5,579 seniors to 10,361 seniors. In 2010, Central Texas financial aid is estimated at \$94 million, up from \$51 million in 2006. College enrollment manager Roy Larson said, “Business’s ability to...get the message to the public school community creates pressure to be cooperative.... [J]ust trying to get students to pass isn’t going to work...they have to be ready for college.”

The Chamber’s disciplined, multifaceted strategy backing the 20,010 by 2010 initiative has delivered. The Chamber exceeded its five-year goal to enroll 20,000 more Central Texas residents in higher education, an overall increase of more than 30%. Texas Common Application rates among Austin-area high school seniors increased from 47% in 2006 to 64% in 2009. The Chamber continues to release reports ranking schools according to

## Serious Change Requires Serious Resources

While it may be helpful to sprinkle a couple thousand dollars for scholarships or textbooks, transformative change requires civic and political leverage, and a key piece of that is being able to target funds. In the initial phase of Opportunity Austin, the Chamber raised \$14 million, a significant portion of which went to education initiatives. Financial Aid Saturdays are financed in part by a \$140,000 annual donation from the Austin Chamber, and 500 volunteers help with the program. The Austin Partners in Education tutoring program has an annual operating budget of around \$2 million.

Once the Nashville Chamber of Commerce installed Marc Hill as chief education officer, they raised \$600,000 each year for three straight years to enable him to drive the Chamber's reform effort. The budget for the upcoming year will most likely increase. In 2010–11, the Chamber had four full-time employees devoted to education. (One Chamber education staffer, Chelsea Parker,

impressed Metro-Nashville Public Schools so much that they hired her to manage the district's SLC program.) Alignment Nashville, an important player in Nashville's school reform landscape, was founded after two prominent businessmen—both former chairs of the Chamber's education committee—kicked in more than \$700,000 to get the organization off the ground.

In Massachusetts, although MBAE's annual operating budget of \$300,000 is not large by business standards, the organization is able to raise funds for specific initiatives. For example, MBAE raised \$150,000 in a few weeks to finance the WestEd Common Core analysis. In addition, the organization secured targeted grants for a review of human capital policies in Boston and has a similar study under way in Springfield. These analyses are commissioned to inject the business perspective into education policy debates and to affect decision making. Recently, MBAE issued a study of school funding that had an immediate impact on this year's Massachusetts House budget proposal.

the percentage of students submitting the Texas Common Application; for the past three years, the regional winner has been Lyndon B. Johnson High School—a 50% black/50% Latino school at which over 95% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. By the end of the 2009–10 school year, 85% of Lyndon B. Johnson seniors had applied to a postsecondary education institution.<sup>12</sup>

### Trust, But Verify

The Austin Chamber and the area school districts enjoy a collaboration based on mutual trust. However, within this cheerful partnership, the Chamber takes a firm, sophisticated approach. Bill Hammond, CEO of the Texas Association of Business, explained, "Chambers need to be critical friends and demanding consumers."<sup>13</sup> In Austin, that sometimes means playing hardball when it

comes to millage elections and bond approvals. In many communities, education advocates go to bat for any and all school funding requests. In its role as a critical customer, the Austin Chamber scrutinizes such requests, insists that they align with the strategic plan, demands evidence of cost-effectiveness, and pushes districts to address business concerns and conditions before it will campaign to secure additional funds.

In 2008, for example, the Austin Chamber threatened to withhold support for a tax rate election to increase per pupil funding unless Austin ISD created and met key end-of-year targets for college enrollment, college readiness, and high school graduation rates. When Austin ISD asked the Chamber to support its grant application to the U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund to help implement performance pay, the Chamber's backing came

with strings attached. Scheberle said, “We had to have the moment when [Austin ISD] knew we were willing to walk away. We gave them a list of non-negotiables [and] said, ‘If you want [our support], then you have to do these things. If you don’t, we’re out.’”

This tough-minded approach gives business “a strong counter voice” to the inertia experienced by many school systems, said Von Byer, director of the Texas Senate Education Committee. “Every group gets complacent with its own structure and has pressure to reach equilibrium,” Byer said. “Unless you have some outside force that pushes the system forward, you are prone to not move forward.” Former Chamber chair Barry Mayer noted that this “horse trading...goes back to building relationships with the school community.... We tell them, ‘We’ll help you with your tax packages, but these are the things you’re going to have to do.’” Lee Holcombe, director of THECB’s Higher Education Policy Institute, agreed that pushing the district from the outside

was essential to creating room for reform. “Here, the [reform] is business community-driven,” Holcombe said. “If the Chamber wasn’t pushing superintendents and principals, while at the same time listening to their concerns, the energy wouldn’t be the same. It’s the power of transparency. Drew [Scheberle] has said, ‘You guys don’t have to do what you signed up to do, but [if you don’t] everyone’s going to know it.’”

Austin’s business community likes to say that it regards itself as a partner, not a watchdog. In practice, though, Austin’s business leaders have a fondness for Ronald Reagan’s approach to arms control: “Trust, but verify.” The Chamber approaches its role as a critical customer not only by shining a light and sharpening expectations, but also by helping convene the education suppliers to solve practical challenges. In doing so, it has created an opportunity for business executives and educational leaders to talk honestly and in detail about their needs and concerns in actionable ways.



Families receive help with their FAFSAs at an Austin Financial Aid Saturday event. (Photo courtesy of R&M Studios)

## **Austin Cast of Characters (in order of appearance):**

**Barry Mayer:** President, Tokyo Electron U.S. Holdings, Inc.

**Drew Scheberle:** Senior Vice President for Education and Talent Development, The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce

**Mike Rollins:** President and CEO, The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce

**Ellen Wood:** President and CEO, vCFO

**Charles Barnett:** President and CEO, Seton Family of Hospitals

**Mark Williams:** Austin ISD School Board Chair

**Roy Larson:** College Enrollment Manager, Manor ISD

**Meria Carstarphen:** Superintendent of Austin ISD

**Ranjit Nair:** Human Resource and Talent Strategist, Nair Talent Solutions, and Former Director of Incentive Pay Strategies, Bank of America

**Gene Austin:** CEO, Convio, Inc., and former Chair, Austin Chamber's Education and Talent Development Program

**Jesús Chávez:** Superintendent of Round Rock ISD

**Rosemary Kelly:** Director, Guidance and Counseling, Round Rock ISD

**Bill Hammond:** President and CEO, Texas Association of Business

**Von Byer:** Committee Director, Texas Senate Education Committee

**Lee Holcombe:** Director, THECB Higher Education Policy Institute

Nashville: Partners  
Who Roll Up  
Their Sleeves

# Nashville: Partners Who Roll Up Their Sleeves

Ralph Schulz, president of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce, arrived in town in the early 1990s, just when the city's business leaders had decided to start paying closer attention to Metropolitan Nashville's schools. "Around 1992, we saw an article titled 'Business Communities Growing in the South . . . Except Nashville,' which identified the fact that education in our community was sub-par," Schulz explained. "That's when the business community started to make education a priority." Business leaders understood that a pool of educated workers was an essential building block for a thriving local economy, but this understanding had not yet translated into meaningful participation in improving Nashville's K-12 pipeline.

In 1993, the Chamber released its first report card grading Metro-Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and created its first staff position dedicated solely to education. Meanwhile, Nashville's PENCIL Foundation, established in 1982, was connecting nonprofits, businesses, and the education community, and the Ford Motor Company was developing a curriculum designed to introduce students to real-world problem solving. Cheryl Carrier, program director of the Ford Motor Company Fund's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education programs, said the curriculum was developed in response to

Ford's difficulty finding workers with the skills the company needed. "We were able to hire engineers and scientists, but we had to send them off to learn how to think critically and solve problems," she said. "They didn't possess the 21st century skills they needed to be successful in our company."

Ford chose Nashville's Glencliff High as the first high school in the country to model the curriculum and brought a team of teachers to Dearborn, Michigan, for training. Starr Herrman, who helped implement the model at Glencliff in the 1990s and is currently director of small learning communities at MNPS, credited this partnership with sparking some of Nashville's early education reform. "This relationship with Ford and the transformation that occurred at Glencliff began some of the early academy reform in Nashville and in Tennessee," she said.

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**"We were able to hire engineers and scientists, but we had to send them off to learn how to think critically and solve problems," she said. "They didn't possess the 21st century skills they needed to be successful in our company."**

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However, like so many well-intentioned education initiatives, these efforts failed to have a meaningful impact. Ralph Schulz said, "In large measure, the work that was done from 1992 to the early 2000s was hit and miss. It was unstructured: everyone's idea had a chance and no one's idea got specific attention. So you saw the Chamber lobbying at the state legislature and failing. You saw Chamber businesses supporting organizations sporadically, but with no real cohesive and unified effort." Sydney

## Lesson Learned

**Alignment Nashville helped coordinate the work of nonprofits to advance the goals of the school system by bringing these leaders together to discuss the problems as well as the solutions they could offer.**

Rogers, executive director of Alignment Nashville, a nonprofit organization dedicated to aligning the priorities of MNPS, local businesses, and nonprofits, agreed: “We had multiple things going on...that weren’t connected. Very little change [had] occurred beyond the [career academy] models scattered throughout the city.”<sup>14</sup>

### Music City Changes Its Tune

In 2004, things started to change when two of the city’s most powerful executives—Orrin Ingram, CEO of Ingram Industries Inc., and Tom Cigarran, CEO of Healthways Inc.—together kicked in over \$700,000 to found Alignment Nashville. Both Ingram and Cigarran had chaired the Nashville Chamber’s education committee; they created the new organization out of a community visioning process initiated by the Chamber to help “coordinate the work of community-based organizations that work with the public schools.”<sup>15</sup>

Schulz recalled the shift in business involvement around the time of Alignment Nashville’s founding: “[I]n the early 2000s, all the business people who had been engaged got impatient. They said we had to do something to organize our efforts and become cohesive.” Alignment Nashville helped coordinate the work of nonprofits to advance the goals of the school system by bringing these leaders together to discuss the problems as well as the solutions they could offer. Schulz said, “When you’re engaging the business community, you have to have an attractive picture of what you’re trying to attempt. Then you have to convince them of

the achievability.... [Businesses are willing] to invest significantly if the picture is attractive and achievability is demonstrated.”

Leaders from across the business, nonprofit, and education communities agreed that MNPS was not producing students with the skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century economy and that outdated curriculum and disengaged students were to blame. To keep students from dropping out, these leaders decided that school needed to look more like real life. Building on the isolated successes at Glencliff and other schools that had implemented an academy model, Alignment Nashville, the Chamber, and the Mayor’s office helped MNPS apply for a U.S. Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) grant that eventually secured over \$6 million to implement SLCs in the district.

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**“When you’re engaging the business community, you have to have an attractive picture of what you’re trying to attempt. Then you have to convince them of the achievability.... [Businesses are willing] to invest significantly if the picture is attractive and achievability is demonstrated.”**

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The SLC grant tied together strands from Ford’s Next Generation Learning Model, including the promise to transform teaching and learning, redesign the high schools, and secure sustained involvement with business and civic leadership. Alignment Nashville executive director Sydney Rogers described the comprehensive nature of the grant application: “The way we wrote the grant was based on what we learned [from Glencliff and Ford]. The reason we were going wall-to-wall is that when you have isolated academies, it’s almost never workable.”

This “wall-to-wall” model called for 8 of Nashville’s 12 high schools to adopt the academy structure—meaning that every student in these schools would choose an academy to enter. In their freshman year, all students would be placed in a freshman academy, with a group of teachers who coordinated their lesson plans. The freshmen would have a chance to sample classes from the different occupational academies and would choose one to enter in their sophomore year. Each academy would have its own specialty and own set of business partnerships. The Academy of Architecture and Construction, for example, would offer classes for students interested in design and preconstruction, HVAC, electrical work, and carpentry; partners such as the Associated General Contractors of Tennessee and Pinnacle Construction would provide in-class demonstrations and help students secure internships.

A hallmark of Nashville’s academy model is its reliance on sustained business engagement rather than a periodic sprinkling of extra dollars. With the SLC grant, the Alignment Nashville high school committee created six partnership councils representing six industries; the councils were headed by local business leaders who recruited partners for each high school. The PENCIL Foundation managed the individual academy-business partnerships. The Chamber provided staff to coordinate the logistics of the partnership councils and engaged “CEO Champions” to make the case for school improvement and publicly praise the academy design. The academy model also entailed extensive teacher externships with local businesses, teacher training in the project-based curriculum, and an “academy coach” at each high school to coordinate all the moving pieces involving schools, teachers, students, and local businesses.

Implementation of the academy model had barely gotten under way when the district was rattled by the August 2007 announcement that

MNPS was one of only two districts in Tennessee identified as “in need of improvement” under No Child Left Behind. MNPS suffered the black mark of being placed in “corrective action,” meaning that the state would have the final say in all district personnel and funding decisions. Pedro Garcia, Nashville’s embattled director of schools, resigned six months after the district was placed in corrective action, and many principals were forced to transfer or were removed by the state. “It was like a fruit basket turnover,” said MNPS director of small learning communities Starr Herrman.

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**“Up until that point, the business community had been incredibly patient with the school system. But when you’re recruiting businesses and families to your city, it takes a lot of energy to battle the perception of a failing school district. It was now no longer tolerable to have a mixed result—some indicators going up, some going down. It was time for bold reform on all fronts.”**

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As the district struggled to keep its head above water, Nashville’s business leaders stepped up their game. The Chamber led the way by hiring Marc Hill as its chief education officer. Hill had been an education advisor to Nashville Mayor Bill Purcell and to the Tennessee House majority leader, and a research analyst for the Tennessee House Education Committee. He brought a keen awareness of the political challenges of education reform, as well as a deep familiarity with the inner workings of the district. Hill recalled the shift that occurred in the business community when the district was placed in corrective action: “Up until that point, the business community had been incredibly patient with the school system. But when you’re

recruiting businesses and families to your city, it takes a lot of energy to battle the perception of a failing school district. It was now no longer tolerable to have a mixed result—some indicators going up, some going down. It was time for bold reform on all fronts.”

Since that low point, Nashville has come a long way. The city’s graduation rate rose from 68.8% in 2006 to 82.9% in 2010, while the suspension rate declined more than 25%. And the percentage of high schools in good standing under No Child Left Behind has risen from 41% in the 2007–08 school year to 53% in 2009–10. In February 2011, the Ford Motor Company Fund named Nashville one of seven “Next Generation Learning” (NGL) hubs, certifying it to offer professional development and guidance to other districts and communities looking to implement Ford’s NGL strands. Nashville’s leaders are the first to admit that they still have a long way to go, but the challenges they have overcome and the lessons they have learned are instructive. What changed in a city that had been treading water for nearly two decades?

### **Pushing From the Outside**

With MNPS in turmoil and the future of the district leadership uncertain, it was up to the business community to drive the SLC effort forward. “Schools don’t actively go against things,” said Jeff Yarbrow, a Nashville lawyer who chairs the Human Services Partnership Council. “They just kill things by lethargy and stasis. The fact that there was institutional support on the community side was important.” Having devoted countless hours and resources to developing, writing, and pitching the SLC plan, business was not about to see it become just another passing fad.

“I believe [the SLCs] would have died if we hadn’t had business pushing from the outside,” said Starr Herrman, SLC director for MNPS. “Because of [corrective action] and a change

in the director [of schools], it was difficult to continue.... None of the eight principals [who requested the SLC grant] are still in place in the schools they were in. But all those people on all those boards—they’re the same people.” Alignment Nashville executive director Sydney Rogers, who helped draft the SLC grant, also cited the importance of cohesive business support: “Having outside structures protects reform in periods like that.... You have a bunch of people saying, ‘We aren’t giving up on this.’”

Part of the business push was to ensure that the new superintendent, Dr. Jesse Register, would stay the course. Register, hired in January 2009, had no experience managing a wall-to-wall academy district, but the business community made sure he stuck with the plan. Chamber president Ralph Schulz said, “Once we became convinced of the value of SLCs, we began a campaign to make the community leadership aware of their impact and value.” Yarbrow explained, “Where the CEOs and the mayor had a big role was in making sure Register’s reform agenda was not going to abandon the academy pathway... It would have been a very strange thing [for him] to pick a different strategic course than the one that had community support.” Register embraced the academy plan.

Having agreed on the mission, Schulz and others soon learned that making a difference in MNPS sometimes meant making waves. To advance their strategy, the business leadership decided that education dollars had to align with the mission. Schulz said, “Alignment Nashville has been extremely effective at identifying priorities.... [A nonprofit] may have a great mission, but if they are going to be engaged with the schools, their agenda is going to align with the school agenda; if it doesn’t, they aren’t going to be funded by us.” The Chamber’s annual MNPS report card, first issued in 1993, provided a powerful tool to analyze performance and champion recommendations.

Business played its most controversial role in the political arena. In 1998, the Nashville Chamber established a political action committee (PAC) to endorse reform-minded candidates for the school board. Marc Hill noted that the Chamber is one of the few organizations that can flex political muscle. “None of the other nonprofits get involved in politics,” he said. In a given four-year cycle, the Chamber donates more than \$25,000 on average to its chosen candidates. That may not sound like a lot, but a 2011 national study of school boards reported that 73.9 % of all board members surveyed spent less than \$1,000 on their campaigns.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the Chamber’s support to candidates, the cost of a school board race in Nashville has gone from a few thousand dollars to more than \$40,000, and seven of the nine members of the current board were endorsed by the Chamber’s PAC. “It’s a lightning rod, no question about it,” said Schulz, “but the business community is adamant about the need to be in this game. It gets nasty sometimes.”

Schulz and the Chamber have experienced firsthand the nastiness that comes from deep engagement. Both were included in a complaint filed by the NAACP alleging that Nashville’s modified school zoning (enacted as part of

the public school choice that accompanied its specialized academies) was discriminatory and would result in de facto segregation. Schulz maintained that business can’t wilt in the face of political attacks but must accept the fact that such disputes come with the territory: “When the NAACP is falsely including us in their complaint, saying we have designed school rezoning that is discriminatory, you better have your leadership so dedicated that it rolls off their back. It isn’t a feel-good exercise. You have to be really committed to the mission.” Hill added that the role of “tough love partner” can include publicly challenging people with whom you have worked closely: “In 2009, [the Chamber] said to the district, ‘It’s time to decide whether you’re going to support the academy models or not.’ It’s an example of ‘We’re watching you; you said you’re going to do it; so, are you going to do it?’”

### The Credibility Question

From the beginning of the SLC effort, the involvement of several key business leaders has been essential. These leaders cultivated relationships and credibility with their peers in the school district and came to be seen as full partners, which has given them a seat at



An academy team of teachers from McGavock High School participates in a Chamber-sponsored externship with executives at Country Music Television (CMT) in June 2010. (Photo courtesy of Nashville Chamber)

the table—especially when it is time to offer hard truths. “All of our organizations have overlapping boards and leadership,” said Marc Hill. “A lot of the same names appear in multiple places. This creates cohesion.” Hill’s own background has helped him both push

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**“I had to...remove some people to get this vision moving forward.... It’s about holding the schools accountable and removing barriers, and a lot of those barriers were people.”**

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and partner with the district from his seat at the Chamber. SLC director Starr Herrman said, “There was a background with Marc since he [had been] in the mayor’s office. People knew about the work that had been done, the results we had gotten, and what could happen if they took it district wide.”

This credibility was not built overnight; it was earned patiently, over time. Emily Coe, academy partner and senior designer, Innovations at Healthways, said being involved with MNPS—talking to teachers and visiting schools—has helped forge understanding: “As business people, we had no idea the challenges that teachers face... We were there one day when drug dogs were sniffing all the lockers. This was stuff that business people have never experienced... Those are some of the realities.” David Crowe, an academy advisory board member for Overton High School and vice president at Louisiana-Pacific Corporation (LP), said the learning happened on both sides. “There’s a culture gap in that business has never been asked to participate in education,” Crowe said. “Educators usually don’t want [business] mucking around in education stuff. The transitio...was the externship, when I had staff from Overton High School come over

to LP for a four- or five-hour period, and we presented what LP was and how we operated. The lead teacher for the engineering academy ...said, ‘I’ve always thought businesses were bad guys.’ He’d never been allowed to engage with real live business folks. Guess what? We’re human.”

Others stressed the importance of business and civic leaders investing time and energy, not just money. Nashville mayor Karl Dean said, “The academies need money, but they mostly need direct involvement from the businesses. You can’t have a banking academy without banks involved.” Alignment Nashville executive director Sydney Rogers cited the importance of having top leaders in the mix: “If you don’t have those CEOs, no amount of superintendents or people like me can make it work.” In Nashville, this aspect of education reform is manifested in the Chamber’s CEO Champions committee, a group of 21 CEOs (including the mayor) that uses its collective financial and political resources to partner with MNPS. Schulz said that this group encourages other CEOs to get involved with education reform: “At the last [Chamber economic development] meeting, we talked about academies. [Afterward]... the CEO of Bridgestone/Firestone walked up and said, ‘I need to be involved.’”

### **Bring in the Closer: Business Recruits Jay Steele**

In 2009, MNPS hired Jay Steele as associate superintendent of high schools. Steele was the director of career education for the St. Johns County School District in St. Augustine, Florida, a Ford NGL Community. Ford Motor Company Fund brought him to Nashville to talk about effective business engagement and the high school academy model. A former band teacher, technical high school principal, and vice president for secondary and adult programs on the campus of a postsecondary technical college, Steele’s thinking on academies and his

## Lesson Learned

**Mayor Dean said business’s vocal support has enabled him to keep schools as a top priority, even in the recent budget crunch: “We’re in a period...where you have to make painful choices, [and] every time you cut or don’t fund something, you get criticized. The idea that Nashville as a city has accepted education as a top priority—it helps people get it.”**

data on the results in St. Johns County wowed the CEO Champions and Superintendent Jesse Register at their quarterly meeting.

Register offered Steele the job of associate superintendent that same day; the deal was sealed a month later, when Mayor Dean, Register, Hill, and a delegation of CEO Champions traveled down to Florida to recruit Steele. Although he was courted by other districts, Steele said he saw a “perfect storm” in Nashville: “[Y]ou had an education mayor with a platform to transform schools and a Chamber with a president and [education] director who were on board and had structures already in place. The one thing missing when it came to the academies was someone at the top of the system who could give resources and push accountability from the top.”

This was the role Steele was recruited to play, and one of his first jobs was to clean house. He said, “I had to...remove some people to get this vision moving forward.... It’s about holding the schools accountable and removing barriers, and a lot of those barriers were people.” Starr Herrman explained that it’s common for some staff to resist changes, such as the shift to SLCs: “Usually, anything new that comes along, there will always be a certain number of people who think it will go away. They try to ride it out.” Steele made it clear that “riding it out” was not an option. He said, “Out of eight schools,

four were implementing the academies at the [proper] level.... The other four were not.... So we had to hold them accountable. Those four principals are gone—I removed them right away. That made everybody fall in line.”

Steele and Herrman credit business support with making it easier to implement SLCs “with fidelity” (see sidebar, “Secrets for Successful SLCs” on page 31). Steele said, “[Businesses] are organizing their lobbyists around things we have asked. They can get a lot of things done... that I can’t.” Mayor Dean said business’s vocal support has enabled him to keep schools as a top priority, even in the recent budget crunch: “We’re in a period...where you have to make painful choices, [and] every time you cut or don’t fund something, you get criticized. The idea that Nashville as a city has accepted education as a top priority—it helps people get it.”

What began as a single Ford Academy of Manufacturing Science evolved into an ambitious, nationally recognized experiment with small learning communities. Nashville now has 12 “wall-to-wall” academy high schools—each with its own logo, brand, and specialty. There are 46 academies at the 12 schools, and a total of 117 business-academy partnerships. Six industry-based partnership councils composed of 22–25 high-level business leaders meet once a month. They advise MNPS of significant trends in the industries, assist in the development of new academies, and connect MNPS with potential partners and resources. Teams of teachers participate in Chamber-sponsored summer externships with the academy partners, receiving stipends while working in real-world settings. Despite some fears that the effort is just one more fad, the results are impressive. District-wide graduation rates have increased by 20% since 2006; in Stratford and Maplewood, the two schools with the lowest graduation rates at the start of the SLC project, graduation rates rose 109% and 104%, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

## Lesson Learned

**“The fact that the Chamber had an education person like Marc was a huge help. Not every Chamber has that.”**

—Starr Herrman, director, Small Learning Communities, Metro Nashville Public Schools

Though these early signs are promising, MNPS leaders know that much work remains to be done. “[T]here is still work to be done in student achievement,” said Steele. “Starr [Herrman] and her team [at MNPS] were achieving good results in attendance, graduation rates, and discipline, but the achievement bump was missing. [Y]ou have to change the curriculum or it’s not going to work.” However, Steele stressed that, if done right, “the academy model is a great structure to address student engagement, curriculum design and delivery, enrichment, and interventions for all students.”

### The Whole Thing Could Have Fallen Apart

Local leaders who want to make business-education partnerships a reality rather than a sound bite can boost their chances of success by following some simple rules. First, business groups can take a big step by creating a staff position dedicated to education policy and hiring an experienced, knowledgeable person. Marc Hill’s background as a researcher for the Tennessee House Education Committee and education advisor to Mayor Bill Purcell made him invaluable to both the Chamber and MNPS. Herrman said, “The fact that the Chamber had an education person like Marc was a huge help. Not every Chamber has that.” Jeff Yarbro, chair of the Human Services Partnership Council, noted that the Chamber, PENCIL, and Alignment Nashville all had at least one staff member dedicated to organizing meetings and assigning concrete tasks to business leaders. He said, “[W]e actually had in the Chamber and in PENCIL [paid staff]...dedicated to these

projects. Staff is really important. If I were responsible for organizing logistics, the whole thing could have fallen apart.”

Another critical step towards effective business engagement in Nashville was the decision to ask only employees with decision-making power to serve on the partnership councils. Kent Fourman, vice president and chief information officer at Permanent General Companies Inc. and chair of the Business, Marketing, and IT Partnership Council, put it bluntly: “This is not a fork and spoon rotary club. You don’t just come to our meetings to eat [or]... talk. These are people with decision-making capabilities.” Herrman noted the distinction between businesses that talk the talk and those that walk the walk. “The term ‘partner’ can be used very loosely,” she said. “It can be someone who comes in to read to the kids or who makes cookies. But a true partner is someone who comes in and helps manage the effort. It’s very important to have those people out there.”

Ford’s support also helped Nashville’s leaders connect the business community with education reform efforts. “Having an external organization like Ford take an interest reinforces to the business community that we are important and that...external expertise [is] available,” Chamber president Ralph Schulz said. “Ford creates an avenue to attract national attention and exposure. So it’s not just funding, it’s reinforcement that builds confidence.” It was Ford’s involvement with Glencliff High School in the late 1990s that served as the basis for the SLC grant and Nashville’s efforts to launch the academy model. Ford also provides continuing in-classroom training, grant funding, and networking for business and education leaders who want to learn from other Ford Next Generation Learning (NGL) communities. However, Ford’s education team is careful to respect local dynamics in promoting the NGL goals. Cheryl Carrier, director of Ford Motor

## Secrets for Successful SLCs

Experience in Nashville and elsewhere suggests that there are good and bad ways to set up smaller learning communities (SLCs). Jay Steele, MNPS associate superintendent of high schools and an authority on SLCs, has seen examples of both. He said creating SLCs “with fidelity” requires keeping several things in mind. Indeed, his advice can be applied to almost any kind of reform strategy.

### **You can’t base reform on an assumption of additional funds, because extra funding can disappear.**

Steele came to Nashville from another district that was implementing SLCs. He said, “That work has now...[stopped], because it was based on funding. You can’t base the SLC model on funding.” Marc Hill, chief education officer for the Nashville Chamber, echoed Steele’s comments: “While you need to invest substantially in professional development to implement SLCs, the additional cost of the SLC model should be minimal. This isn’t an add-on program; it’s delivering the high school curriculum in a different way. SLCs are about redesigning high schools, not creating parallel systems. There is an opportunity to stop spending money on things that don’t fit into the new direction.”

### **Accountability and a willingness to clean house are essential.**

When he came to town, Steele said, “SLCs were happening in small patches, but [there was] no

one...at the top of the system who could provide resources and push accountability.” Steele had to get the right people on board and get some people out of the system: “I had to clean house and remove some people to get this vision moving forward. I removed...four principals right away. That made everybody fall in line.”

### **SLCs are no silver bullet. They require the right curriculum, teachers, and partnerships.**

Without the right pieces, SLCs will disappoint. Steele said, “You can do the academy model, but you have to change the curriculum or it’s not going to work. [The curriculum] has to be inquiry-based, so the kids are asking ‘Why?’ and are constantly researching and coming up with their own solutions.” He added, “[MNPS] was getting good results in attendance, graduation rates, and dropping discipline, but...the achievement bump was missing, because the curriculum couldn’t change.”

### **Districts can’t settle for working around existing structures.**

Steele said, “The first thing we did was put the entire district on the same schedule, because we couldn’t effectively change anything unless we got them on the same schedule based on themes. We had to get the structure in place first. Then, within the structure, teachers had to have common planning time where they could work together. We gave them 90 minutes a day to plan as a team— [the district’s SLC team] created a guide that showed them how to do this.”

Fund’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Programs, said, “Ford doesn’t come in and say, ‘This is how you do it.’ But we do require that they have all the major stakeholders at the table.... Basically, we help them facilitate discussions [and] explain the whole process to them, and they as a community begin to develop their master plan.”

While Ford offered new opportunities to Nashville, it was up to the business community to seize the chance. As Carrier said, “It’s about the business leadership and civic leadership

sitting down and rolling up their sleeves.” After some early stumbles, the Nashville leadership got this right. They erected structures that forged strong partnerships and provided the staff and support necessary to move the ball. Business was not afraid to help the district hold firm in its strategic direction or to provide the requisite political support. In addition, business drew on its agility and ability to move quickly to support the academies and help the district attract the personnel it needed.

## **Nashville Cast of Characters (in order of appearance):**

**Ralph Schulz:** President and CEO, Nashville Chamber of Commerce

**Cheryl Carrier:** Program Director of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Programs, Ford Motor Company Fund

**Starr Herrman:** Director, Small Learning Communities, Metro Nashville Public Schools

**Sydney Rogers:** Executive Director, Alignment Nashville

**Marc Hill:** Chief Education Officer, Nashville Chamber of Commerce

**Jeff Yarbro:** Chair, Human Services Partnership Council and Associate, Bass, Berry & Sims PLC

**Emily Coe:** Academy Partner and Senior Designer, Innovations, Healthways

**David Crowe:** Academy Advisory Board Member, Overton High School, and Vice President, Corporate Engineering and Technology, Louisiana-Pacific Corporation

**Karl Dean:** Mayor of Nashville

**Jay Steele:** Associate Superintendent of High Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools

**Kent Fourman:** Chair, Business, Marketing, & IT Partnership Council, and Chief Information Officer, Permanent General Assurance Corporation

# Massachusetts: Taking the Long View

# Massachusetts: Taking the Long View

In July 2009, President Barack Obama announced the \$4.5 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) competition. Funded as part of the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act enacted that spring by Congress, the program would award grants to the states judged to have the most promising education reform plans according to a set of criteria issued by the U.S. Department of Education. Massachusetts, along with 40 other states and the District of Columbia, aggressively pursued RTTT money. In January 2010, Massachusetts enacted the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap as part of its push to win RTTT dollars. Hailed by Governor Deval Patrick as “the second chapter of Massachusetts education reform,” the bill established Innovation Schools with autonomy and flexibility within school districts, provided new approaches to turn around underachieving schools, and instituted a “smart cap” increase on the number of charter schools in the lowest performing districts.<sup>18</sup>

The bill followed months of debate among various stakeholders, including the Massachusetts Business Roundtable (MBR), the Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM), and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE). The MBAE focused on the

issue of turnaround school management and succeeded in altering the act’s final language to protect the autonomy of turnaround operators. MBAE executive director Linda Noonan said her organization played a key role in getting significant reforms to turn around underperforming schools: “We led an alliance of business groups in advocating to provide the greatest possible authority for school leaders to remove staff at underperforming schools and to select the team they need to make rapid and permanent progress.”

To the surprise of many, Massachusetts came up empty in March 2010, when Secretary of Education Arne Duncan named Delaware and Tennessee the first-round RTTT winners. As Massachusetts geared up for the competition’s second round, education leaders convened a working group of stakeholders to revise the state’s application. Noonan was a key member of this group; she worked with representatives from the Massachusetts Department of Education to finalize the application.

In August 2010, Massachusetts was named a round-two RTTT winner, posting the competition’s highest overall score.<sup>19</sup> The state’s victory was aided by its decision to adopt the Common Core standards, a set of K–12 math and language arts standards designed by a consortium of states under the leadership of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. States that adopted these standards were awarded 20 points on their RTTT applications; without these 20 points, Massachusetts would have finished fifth in the second round.<sup>20</sup> In July, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had voted unanimously to adopt the Common Core standards in English and math; it was the 27th state to adopt the standards.<sup>21</sup>

The push to adopt the Common Core in Massachusetts encountered stiff resistance

from the Republican and Independent gubernatorial candidates in the 2010 election; the Pioneer Institute, a vocal Massachusetts think tank; and several long-time proponents of the respected Massachusetts state standards. Commissioner of education Mitchell Chester, Governor Deval Patrick, and former commissioners of education Robert Antonucci and David Driscoll favored Common Core adoption. However, it was the support of the Massachusetts business community, led by the MBAE, that ultimately had the biggest impact on the adoption of the standards.

At the time, the Massachusetts standards were considered the best in the nation. Some questioned whether the Common Core would signal a retreat from those standards or whether the new standards might be adopted and implemented in problematic ways. For our purposes here, the focus is not on the debate over the Common Core but on the manner in which MBAE effectively weighed in on a crucial policy debate.

## On the Shoulders of a Giant

The partnership between Massachusetts business and education began as something of a shotgun marriage during the tumultuous period following Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr.'s 1974 ruling in the long-running dispute regarding forced busing in Boston. As part of the court-ordered desegregation plan, Garrity established 20 business-school partnerships, which were to be administered by the Boston Trilateral Council for Quality Education, a group created by the Boston Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Businesses.<sup>22</sup> However, many business leaders felt as though they had been “dragged into the arena [of education reform] by court order,” and the mandatory partnerships failed to provide a sustainable process for relationship-building between school and business leaders.<sup>23</sup>

In 1982, the business community and Boston Public Schools (BPS) established the Boston Compact, which stated that BPS would improve daily attendance, reduce the dropout rate by



Secretary of Education Paul Reville offers remarks on Massachusetts securing \$250 million in Race to the Top funding as MBAE executive director Linda Noonan, Governor Deval Patrick, commissioner of elementary and secondary education Mitchell Chester, and others look on. (Photo courtesy of Matt Bennett/Governor Patrick's Office)

## Lesson Learned

**“It was more than just philanthropy, it was a vital interest. We then graduated...to a more systemic orientation to involvement. We all came to the realization that we would have to work on state policy to change [education].”**

—Paul Reville, Massachusetts secretary of education and co-founder, MBAE

5% each year, and would improve reading and math scores of graduates. In return, Boston businesses would increase their hiring of BPS graduates by 5% each year, and Boston colleges and universities would increase college placement of these students by 5% each year. The Boston Compact was an important first step toward more sustained collaboration between the business and education communities, but its limited focus on high school graduates prevented it from having a significant impact.<sup>24</sup> The compact was followed in 1984 by the Bank of Boston’s unprecedented move to endow a \$1.5 million dollar fund for the city’s public schools. Named the Boston Plan for Excellence in Public Schools, the gift was the largest of its kind to a public school system in the entire country.<sup>25</sup>

As the role of business in education grew, Jack Rennie, CEO of Pacer Systems Inc.—a mid-sized information technology and systems engineering firm—became frustrated with “the lack of clear goals, accountability, [and] human resource development” in the public school system.<sup>26</sup> Rennie wanted to bring “the entrepreneurial spirit usually found in start-up companies to educational reform.”<sup>27</sup> In 1988, recognizing that partnerships alone could not “bring out long-term change,” Rennie helped form the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE).<sup>28</sup> The alliance was intended to bring together concerned business leaders and mobilize them to effect policy change. Alan Macdonald, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and an

original member of MBAE, said Rennie was the first leader to effect real change in the education system. “Prior to 1993,” Macdonald said, “business leadership had started to show interest in education reform. [Businesses] got active in the Boston Compact, and major employers had partnered up with schools. However, these efforts were minor league reform...It took someone like Jack to say, ‘Let’s put the stake in the ground over here and get it done.’”<sup>29</sup>

The MBAE and its founding members, including current Massachusetts secretary of education Paul Reville, conducted a top-to-bottom evaluation of the state’s educational system and published a report in 1991 entitled *Every Child a Winner!*. The report was hailed by Peter Finn, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, as “the most comprehensive look at the state’s K to 12 system I’ve seen in my 30 years in education.”<sup>30</sup> It became the blueprint for the bipartisan Massachusetts School Reform Act of 1993, enacted after two years of wrangling, political maneuvering, and joint meetings among a Democratic legislature, a Republican governor, and the MBAE. Rennie became a fixture at the statehouse and played a key role in moving the negotiations along. Henry Dinger, an MBAE board member who helped craft the Reform Act, said, “[Rennie] was willing to spend more time than a rational person would spend. He was a bulldog.”

Regarded as one of the nation’s most ambitious examples of statewide reform, the Act called for the state to develop curriculum frameworks based on uniform standards; measured performance through a pioneering system of high-stakes exams; introduced charter schools; and, in Chapter 70, created a system for state investment in public education—the foundation budget. Before Chapter 70, the state contributed less money as a percentage of its budget to K–12 education, leaving districts to rely on local property tax revenues for funding. The

Chapter 70 formula calls for the state to more equitably distribute dollars to districts where local property tax revenue is not enough to meet state-determined “adequate funding levels.”<sup>31</sup>

Although school-business partnerships had increased from 500 when Rennie founded MBAE in 1988 to 6,000 by 1993, the Reform Act initiated a more sustained collaboration between the business community and education reformers.<sup>32</sup> Secretary Reville put it this way: “There was a strong history of school-business partnerships in Massachusetts. That’s how Jack [Rennie] and I got involved. It was more than just philanthropy, it was a vital interest. We then graduated...to a more systemic orientation to involvement. We all came to the realization that we would have to work on state policy to change [education].” Reville cited Rennie’s leadership, MBAE’s political success, and the active involvement of business as key factors that earned business a seat near the head of the table when it came to school reform. MBAE had supplied the framework for reform in *Every Child a Winner!*, demonstrating their expertise, efficacy, and seriousness in the process. It was a given, then, that business would be an active force in K–12 education.

Before the Education Reform Act, Massachusetts was tied for third in the nation on fourth grade National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading scores, but was hovering between seventh and twelfth in the nation for fourth and eighth grade math scores. The assessment regime that emerged from the Reform Act—known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)—is one of the most rigorous in the nation for both math and reading.<sup>33</sup> In the nearly two decades since 1993, Massachusetts has become perhaps the nation’s most successful experiment in systemic school improvement. The state has led the nation in fourth and eighth grade NAEP scores for both reading in math every year since 2005,<sup>34</sup> and was

ranked first in *Education Week’s* “Quality Counts 2010” report for K–12 education achievement.<sup>35</sup>

### **From the Top of the Mountain: The Common Core**

When Massachusetts geared up for the Race to the Top competition, MBAE took care to protect its seat at the table. It did not opt into the RTTT coalition established by the Boston Foundation. MBAE executive director Linda Noonan said, “[We believed]...that business had a strong and influential voice that would be more effectively heard if we remained as a unique, employer-based voice and not part of a broader-based group.” MBAE showed a shrewd awareness of the political and communications landscape, which helped protect its independent brand.

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**“[We believed]...that business had a strong and influential voice that would be more effectively heard if we remained as a unique, employer-based voice and not part of a broader-based group.”**

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Andre Mayer, senior vice president of communications and research at the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, praised MBAE’s tight focus: “MBAE is seen as the watchdog of education reform, giving it a certain credibility that other organizations don’t have on the issue.” Alan Macdonald, executive director of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, thinks this credibility is a function of MBAE’s not letting up after its victories, even as others move on to new issues and concerns. “There’s a tendency of business folks to say, ‘Didn’t we already do that?’” observed Macdonald. “The fact that MBAE would bring us all together and keep us focused is very important.”

## Lesson Learned

**MBAE realized that the only way it was going to get an independent evaluation of the Common Core and the new state standards was by commissioning its own study.**

MBAE stepped into a leading role when it came to a key debate posed by RTTT: the question of whether Massachusetts should adopt the Common Core standards. Developed starting in 2008 by a collaboration among states and various supporters, with substantial philanthropic funding and under the guiding hand of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core was the first effort in nearly two decades to encourage states to adopt common academic standards. The standards covered grades 1 through 12 in reading and math, and were embraced by more than 40 states during 2010. The U.S. Department of Education had announced that it would award additional RTTT points to states that had adopted the Common Core standards.

In Massachusetts, critics argued that the Common Core threatened to dilute the state's widely praised standards and undermine its accountability system. Jim McManus, principal partner at the public relations firm Slowey/McManus Communications, explained, "[Adopting] the Common Core was seen by some as a risky proposition. There was fear that we would be giving up ground to be a part of the group." Jim Stergios, executive director of the Pioneer Institute, argued that the Common Core standards probably were a step up for most states. "But," he added, "if you're sitting on top of the mountain like Massachusetts is, it's a long way down to what's being proposed."<sup>36</sup> Tom Birmingham, former Massachusetts Senate president and co-author of the state's 1993 Education Reform Act, said he was puzzled about why the state

would switch to the Common Core: "We've got the best education performance in the country, and before we tinker with that, there's a very strong burden of proof that someone wanting to change it has to make."<sup>37</sup>

Given the acclaim for its existing content standards and its leadership in standards-based reform, Massachusetts loomed as a giant prize in the Common Core battle. Advocates for the Common Core regarded winning over Massachusetts as an important step to reassure states and skeptics about the standards. The debate grew especially heated as a result of these pressures and the closely contested gubernatorial race between Democratic incumbent and Common Core supporter Deval Patrick and GOP challenger Charlie Baker, who opposed the standards.

Both sides took to the papers to make their cases, drawing headlines such as "Critics: Education Test Standards Too Common," "Lower Education? Fed Plan Said to Lower Bar for Mass. Kids," and "Leadership Bites the Dust."<sup>38</sup> The question of what to do about the state's reform legacy pulled the business community into the debate. Massachusetts Secretary of Education Paul Reville opined that, "The business community was forced to take a position on the Common Core... [largely because of] the vigorous opposition of the Pioneer Institute." Having played a critical role in leading standards-based reform for two decades, MBAE knew that business and policy leaders would take its guidance seriously.

MBAE was open to supporting the Common Core effort as part of the RTTT, but business leaders did not want to compromise the standards so many people had worked hard to erect. To ensure that the Common Core did not represent a retreat, MBAE's leaders needed to see a comparison of the proposed Common Core standards and the recently revised state standards. Analyses were being conducted by

Achieve Inc., a group instrumental in drafting the Common Core standards, and by the Pioneer Institute, but these two groups had staked out strong positions in advance. Without an independent report on which to base its judgment, MBAE was not ready to take a stand.

### **If You Want to Get Something Done...**

MBAE realized that the only way it was going to get an independent evaluation of the Common Core and the new state standards was by commissioning its own study. A majority of the 22 board members agreed, and the alliance moved quickly to raise \$181,000 from the Gates Foundation, Intel, and Nellie Mae to finance the project. MBAE initiated a competitive bidding process and chose California-based WestEd to conduct the evaluation.

Throughout the process, executive director Linda Noonan made it clear that MBAE would pull the plug if it appeared that the analysis might be biased. “Gates [initially] had a standard clause in the agreement that they would get to see the report before it was released,” said Noonan. “I told them I can’t sign this, so they took out that provision.” MBAE insisted that WestEd erect a firewall between anyone who had been involved in drafting the Common Core standards and the staff conducting the evaluation. Noonan said, “It was important for everyone to know that if there were any strings attached, MBAE was more than willing to walk away and not take a position.”

Jan Phlegar, director of WestEd’s Learning Innovations Program, was reassured by the attention to procedural safeguards: “We were... concerned with our reputation. We needed to have assurance that we could conduct the study completely independently without...being told what to look for.” The contract called for WestEd to engage three external reviewers to check the methodology and analysis (see sidebar, “Generating Research That Has an Impact” on

page 41). The independent reviewers assured MBAE that the report would be unbiased. The task of delivering a credible piece of research was made tougher by the tight deadline. August 2, 2010, was the cutoff for states to adopt the Common Core and receive bonus points on their RTTT applications, so the Massachusetts State Board of Education had to vote on adoption by mid-July.

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**MBAE has been at the table with its sleeves rolled up for two decades. It has expertise, relationships, and experience. It moves quickly, it is entrepreneurial, it protects its brand, and it understands the use of data. Business communities elsewhere can emulate MBAE, but it requires commitment, time, and hard work.**

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The final 152-page study provided a detailed look at how the Massachusetts English and math curriculum frameworks compared with the Common Core pre-K–12 language arts and math standards. WestEd “crosswalked” the two sets of standards, gauging the degree of alignment in four categories: content skill and knowledge, depth of knowledge, clarity, and measurability. WestEd also compared the vertical alignment of the standards—the extent to which skills and knowledge in the standards aligned across grades and increased in complexity across grade levels.<sup>39</sup> WestEd found that the two sets of math standards were 96% aligned and the language arts standards were 74% aligned. WestEd reported that the lower alignment results for language arts were due primarily to the fact that the Massachusetts standards focused more on specific genres of literature, whereas the Common Core standards focused more on specific skills that applied across genres. WestEd concluded that “for both mathematics and [English language

## Lesson Learned

**“When you’re working on big reform bills, you want to work with reasonable people. You have to have a long view, so you never want to get nasty or threatening. Some people come in with a wish list . . . MBAE came in with solutions and flexibility.”**

—Michele Shelton, former senior policy analyst, Massachusetts State Senate

arts], the [Massachusetts] standards and the [Common Core standards] overlap in content coverage and are comparable in terms of clarity and measurability.”

MBAE scheduled a board meeting for Thursday, July 15 to review the WestEd findings and vote on whether to recommend adoption of the Common Core standards. However, it became necessary to push this meeting to Monday, July 19, just two days before the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education was to vote on the Common Core. At the MBAE meeting, the board members read the executive summary, and WestEd representatives walked them through the findings. The board debated for two hours on whether to endorse the Common Core; ultimately it opted to recommend adoption. A press release was written and relayed to reporters within hours. The WestEd report was posted on the MBAE website and was widely read. By the end of the next day—after a conference call with reporters and other business groups in which MBAE reviewed the findings of the report and its reasons for supporting adoption—four other major business groups had recommended adoption of the Common Core. On July 21, 2010, just two days after the release of the WestEd report, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted unanimously to adopt the Common Core standards in English and math.

State education leaders credited the MBAE report with giving them the final signal of

approval they needed to make the vote. “The [MBAE] study...was a key piece of objective information that we were able to present to the board,” said Jeffrey Nellhaus, Massachusetts deputy commissioner of education.

Massachusetts secretary of education Paul Reville agreed that the report made a big difference: “The fact that the report emerged from MBAE, which is seen as the guardian of education and a mainstream business group, [made it]...more effective.... It was very convincing to people when they saw that congruence [between the two sets of standards].”

Its extensive experience in Massachusetts policy gave MBAE a keen feel for what would satisfy its members and what it would take for a study to have validity and credibility. Michele Shelton, a former senior policy analyst for the Massachusetts State Senate, explained, “The MBAE report helped...take the politics out of the decision. [It] put down in black and white that there weren’t a lot of differences, so it shouldn’t be a political decision but a no-brainer if it helps leverage the RTTT application.”

### The Value of a Long-Term View

Business leaders in other states who have been frustrated by the difficulty of significantly affecting education policy decisions have sometimes expressed wonder at MBAE’s track record. It is important to note that there are no shortcuts and no single solution. MBAE has been at the table with its sleeves rolled up for two decades. It has expertise, relationships, and experience. It moves quickly, it is entrepreneurial, it protects its brand, and it understands the use of data. Business communities elsewhere can emulate MBAE, but it requires commitment, time, and hard work.

Regardless of whether one supports or disagrees with the Common Core standards, it’s vital to recognize how MBAE’s respect for credible data helped the alliance protect its

## Generating Research That Has an Impact

The Massachusetts example shows how a business community can use its independence and agility to solicit and disseminate research that plays a powerful role in shaping policy. But producing such research is no simple task. It requires careful attention to ensuring that the research is accepted as independent, credible, and rigorous. Interviewees at the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) and evaluation contractor WestEd provided some guidance on that score.

### Use a professional, competitive procurement process.

Jan Phlegar, director of WestEd's Learning Innovations Program, said MBAE's competitive procurement process was an important factor in enabling WestEd to maintain its credibility. "The fact that the [Common Core] analysis was competitive helped keep it from being politicized," Phlegar said. "MBAE was clearly looking for a number of proposals, and they had several criteria besides rigor. They didn't want anyone in the study who had been involved in any of the interest groups. Because of this, some people were recused."

### Think about what you really need and be clear up front about the scope of the research.

Universities are home to some terrific research talent, but their processes, requirements, and

culture often mean they are on the slow side. On the other hand, many of the big national evaluators and consultants are very expensive. To avoid problems down the road, make it crystal clear what you expect in terms of speed, cost, and usefulness. Steve Hamilton, director of district and school services in WestEd's Learning Innovations Program, said MBAE was clear about its expectations before the study and "we...spent a lot of time upfront clarifying the type of support MBAE would want after the report was complete." A note of caution: Dictating the scope of a report and the questions it needs to answer is very different from attempting to dictate conclusions. As MBAE executive director Linda Noonan said, "We were careful to define our questions [but] not methodology. That would [be] as dangerous as dictating conclusions, [because] then it isn't research."

### Enlist independent contractors to review the methodology and conclusions.

Because of the heated debate, MBAE knew that the validity of the report would inevitably be challenged by Common Core opponents. To ensure that the report's methodology and conclusions were sound, MBAE asked WestEd to find three independent reviewers to examine the report. Steve Hamilton said, "It was darn difficult to find them, but they protected WestEd and assured MBAE that the report would be unbiased." An external review process also signals to policymakers and media that research findings have been vetted.

own credibility during the debate. MBAE board member Henry Dinger remarked, "If a business group doesn't rely on data, they are going to get marginalized and more easily dismissed. People are going to say, 'Well, you're just anti-teacher' or 'You want to privatize everything.'"

MBAE's influence is also a product of the way it and the Massachusetts business community have approached issues. Beth Gamse, MBAE board member and principal associate at Abt Associates Inc., said, "It's about having a long-term view built into the fabric of the

organization. It's recognizing that...you can't get there without building a foundation."

MBAE's "long-view" approach is influenced by its seasoned membership. "One of our huge assets has been the continuity over the years," said Massachusetts Business Roundtable executive director Alan Macdonald. "MBAE isn't a cage-rattling group or a political group. We've worked just as closely with the GOP and the Dems. That's a big thing, because the chairs of the education committee change over time, the governors change, and the business

## Showing Up Is Half the Battle

When it comes to fighting for reform, Alan Macdonald, president of the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, believes that “showing up is half the battle.” Whether it’s sitting down with legislative staff, attending school board meetings, or serving on your local Chamber’s education committee, simply showing up helps you build relationships that are key to establishing credibility—a huge step toward gaining traction with local educational leaders.

As MBAE board member Henry Dinger said of Alliance founder Jack Rennie: “[Rennie] was willing to spend more time than a rational person would spend. He was...able to free up enough of his time so there was a single face at all the

leaders change.” (See sidebar, “Showing Up Is Half the Battle” on page 42.) This approach has made for sustained MBAE influence at the statehouse. Former state Senate policy analyst Michele Shelton said, “When you’re working on big reform bills, you want to work with reasonable people. You have to have a long view, so you never want to get nasty or threatening. Some people come in with a wish list...MBAE came in with solutions and flexibility.”

Linda Noonan recalled how MBAE’s reputation allowed it to secure one of the first meetings with key players in the legislature when it came to discussing proposals for the 2010 Act Relative to the Achievement Gap:

There were a lot of groups that had put in a request for meetings. But we had Henry [Dinger], who had written the ‘93 [Education Reform Act] law, and were told that because we had been advocating so hard on the turnaround school piece of the bill, the bill’s proponents wanted to hear what the case was for that first before they heard the opposition. It was in part some

meetings. Everyone saw that he was there, and everyone who met him knew within 10 minutes that he was passionately committed.”

Superintendent Meria Carstarphen of Austin ISD said the business community’s sustained role in the district was a huge plus when she was considering whether to take the job: “The idea that you could walk into a room where teacher associations, administrator associations, the business community, and the school district are actively involved in working on strategy for strategic compensation—an issue that’s typically a deal-breaker in other communities—was one of the most appealing things about this position.” She added, “Being in a world where the Chamber helps create space for people to be innovative and creative—it opens up tons of opportunities.”

recognition of our past reputation, but it was also a function of the connections we had already made in the legislature.

In other words, MBAE’s historic role and its deep involvement in the RTTT debates helped secure access. Businesses that want to play a significant role in state or local policy would do well to take note of MBAE’s “long-view” approach and how the alliance has positioned itself in the evolving political landscape. Its impassioned founder helped the organization find its feet, but skillful positioning, seasoned leadership, and reliance on research have helped it race to the top—and stay there.

## **Massachusetts Cast of Characters (in order of appearance):**

**Linda Noonan:** Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE)

**Paul Reville:** Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Co-founder, MBAE

**Jack Rennie:** CEO, Pacer Systems, Inc., and Co-founder, MBAE

**Alan Macdonald:** Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Roundtable

**Henry Dinger:** MBAE Board Member and Co-drafter, Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993

**Andre Mayer:** Senior Vice President, Communications and Research, The Associated Industries of Massachusetts

**James McManus:** Principal Partner, Slowey/McManus Communications

**Jim Stergios:** Executive Director, Pioneer Institute

**Tom Birmingham:** Former Massachusetts Senate President and Co-drafter, Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993

**Jan Phlegar:** Director, Learning Innovations Program, WestEd

**Steve Hamilton:** Director, District and School Services and Learning Innovations, WestEd

**Jeffrey Nellhaus:** Massachusetts Deputy Commissioner of Education

**Michele Shelton:** Former Senior Policy Analyst, Massachusetts State Senate

**Beth Gamse:** MBAE Board Member and Principal Associate, Abt Associates Inc.

# Three Promising Strategies

As we spoke with people in these locales, three crucial roles emerged for business when it comes to K–12 education: critical customer, partner, and policy advocate. In Austin, being a critical customer involves raising the sense of urgency, introducing new strategies and players, creating accountability metrics, and creating boundary-spanning opportunities for educators and district leaders. In Nashville, partnering is primarily about working with districts to provide support and expertise, supply political cover, and ensure that reform stays on the rails. In Massachusetts, policy advocacy entails bringing credibility and muscle to bear on the actions of policymakers and officials.

These three roles are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary. The MBAE became a powerful force in Massachusetts because of its long track record as a partner. In Austin and Nashville, effectiveness required a willingness to push on the levers of state and local policy. We saw evidence of all three strategies in each locale; communities can employ them in different ways and at different times.

## Critical Customer

Business can serve as a firm hand on the back, a watchdog, the hammer that provides

the pressure, and the cover that shifts reform efforts into high gear. School systems are rife with impediments, bureaucratic routines, reluctant staff, and pockets of sheer ineptitude. Tough measures are often necessary to blast through the status quo and pave the way for more genial cooperation.

In communities across the nation, there's a pressing need for information on how school systems and schools are faring. In most cases, the local business community is best equipped to collect and publish that kind of information. The business community is also in a position to push, prod, and provide the continuity that can elude school districts buffeted by politics and leadership turnover.

Business leaders can also bring political muscle. In Austin, former Chamber chair Barry Mayer noted that he's willing to tell district leaders, "We'll help you with your tax packages, but these are the things you're going to have to do." Marc Hill, chief education officer at the Nashville Chamber, said of the Chamber's report card, "It's an example of 'We're watching you; you said you're going to do it; so, are you going to do it?'" Ralph Schulz, president of the Nashville Chamber, referring to the political action committee, said, "It's a lightning rod, no question about it. But the business community is adamant about the need to be in this game. It gets nasty sometimes."

## Partner

Business is in the position to operate as a resource, ally, and nimble difference-maker. As local employers with substantial roots and investments in the community, business leaders have the credibility to speak about education issues in a way that will resonate with voters and policymakers. Business leaders also can share their expertise with finances, HR systems, information technology, and accountability.

## Working With Legislators

The three locales featured in this report all draw on the skills of individuals who have mastered the art of working with legislators on education issues. While few local business communities may start with this kind of advantage, simple tips can help business leaders communicate more effectively with legislators and, in turn, give themselves a better chance for a seat at the table in high-stakes policy debates.

### **Don't wait until budget season to meet with legislators or staff. Come in early and often.**

Former Massachusetts Senate staffer Michele Shelton said, "At the start of a new session, many people set up appointments to do meet-and-greets. This is a better approach than waiting for the budget to come out. Setting up quick 15-minute meet-and-greets with new legislators, staffers, or chairs gets you on the radar screen in a way that's not asking anything." Shelton also stressed the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with legislative staff: "Coming in and sitting down with a legislator or staff [member] is more effective than hearings to communicate [the business community's] message. If you can develop relationships with staff, that's the more effective way to advocate."

### **Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize.**

Just as a business must decide what year-end targets to pursue, the business community must

decide what issues it most wants the legislature to address. Von Byer, director of the Texas Senate Education Committee, put it this way: "Everything is a matter of priorities. You have a limited amount of time; you have to convince [legislative staff] that whatever your particular issue is, it's so important that they have to make it a priority." Barry Mayer, president of the semiconductor manufacturer Tokyo Electron U.S. Holdings Inc. and active player in Austin reform efforts, said business must also push the school districts to prioritize: "Though we knew it was going to be tough, the Chamber told the school districts to come up with two or three top-priority items. We know we only have so many shots at the batter's box when we go to the legislator, but if we have two or three top issues, it's manageable."

### **Come in with solutions, not wish lists.**

Legislative staffers say it's vital for business to show up with potential solutions. Of her experience crafting legislation in the Massachusetts Senate, Michele Shelton said, "When you're working on big reform bills, you want to work with people who are reasonable. Don't come in with a list of demands. Come in with broad issues, and an idea of how we can work on these together." Von Byer agreed that a solutions-oriented approach can help get legislators on board: "If you can convince a legislator that your issue is worth going after and offer ideas for how to solve the problem, it makes it easier."

Of course, for its counsel to be welcome and useful, business must recognize and acknowledge the complexities of schooling and school district management, including the unique burdens imposed by federal and state regulations. Public agencies move slowly, and school systems are hampered by regulations, public meeting requirements, statutory processes, bidding rules, and other obligations that can slow down even determined reformers. Business is in a different position: The local business community can quickly deploy money and political muscle at critical junctures.

Business can also convene meetings among education, civic, and business leaders. It is surprising how little most local business and education leaders know about each other's worlds. Regular interaction can raise concerns, address confusion, and offer concrete opportunities to work together. Barry Mayer, president of the semiconductor manufacturer Tokyo Electron U.S. Holdings Inc. and former chair of the Austin Chamber, recalled that back in the 1990s, the Chamber invited local superintendents to a meeting to discuss how to train future scientists and prepare graduates to enter the thriving local

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**“It makes a difference when a business person comes in to testify and says, ‘I don’t care what your [standardized test] scores or your little sheet of paper in front of you says, the kids who come to work for us can’t read.’”**

—Von Byer, Texas Senate Education Committee

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semiconductor manufacturing business. Mayer recalled, “[N]ear the end of the meeting, one of them raised his hand and asked, ‘What’s a semiconductor?’... They hadn’t even known what they were on board for!”

### **Policy Advocate**

Local businesses can provide the kind of visible and influential leadership that affects policymaking. In fact, trying to make improvements without engaging in policy is usually a recipe for frustration, as good ideas break like waves on an inhospitable beach. Lasting change requires not just promising programs and people but the removal of local and state policies that impede them and the creation of policies that support their continued success (see sidebar, “Working With Legislators” on page 45). Von Byer, director of the Texas Senate Education Committee, explained, “It makes a difference when a business person comes in to testify and says, ‘I don’t care what your [standardized test] scores or your little sheet of paper in front of you says, the kids who come to work for us can’t read.’”

Business is a more effective force when business and educational leaders can talk to one another. In all three cases examined here, the presence of credible and connected advocates strengthened the business community’s hand. Recruiting people like Drew Scheberle, Marc Hill, and Linda Noonan, and giving them

the support they needed enabled business to be tough without seeming out of touch or unreasonable. Their political connections and expertise made them invaluable assets to local educators, and ensured that their opinions and criticisms carried weight.

Business’s biggest assets can be its credible, independent voice and its ability to take the long view. Business commitment to K–12 improvement cannot be an occasional thing or a kindhearted gesture. Making a difference requires showing up to claim—and then earn—a seat at the table.



MBAE executive director Linda Noonan participates in a panel discussion on a school finance report released by MBAE in December 2010. (Photo courtesy of MBAE)

# Keys to Making a Difference



Marc Hill, chief education officer at the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, speaks at a CEO Champions meeting. (Photo courtesy of Gary Layda)

In each of the three cases, the local business community embraced a distinctive strategy to tackle local challenges; despite the variations, a number of common themes emerged. Across the locales, five key elements of bold business leadership were evident:

- 1. Be a partner, not a pawn.** Partnership is a two-way street. Working with school districts or policymakers doesn't mean carrying their water; it means settling on shared objectives and pursuing them jointly.
- 2. Leverage the unique assets business brings.** When business leaders work with state and school district officials on K–12 schooling, they need to keep in mind that they are negotiating not as claimants but as valued partners.
- 3. Get in for the long haul.** Businesses often have other priorities besides K–12 education, so it is vital to structure a role that allows business to sustain its involvement and not permit the effort to be an enthusiasm that comes and goes.

- 4. Learn the issues and hire an expert point person.** Business leaders can sometimes be either unduly impressed by educational jargon and fads or too quick to dismiss practical challenges and educational expertise. Neither approach gets results. Effective engagement requires that business leaders invest time and energy to become acquainted with the issues and the local stakeholders. They should hire an expert who knows the ins and outs of education policy and can leverage the strengths of business to drive improvement.
- 5. Don't shy away from policy and politics.** Business leaders have a natural inclination to stay out of heated education debates. But school systems are public agencies spending public dollars to serve the public's children. Serious reform requires changing policy, and that means political debate.

# Luck Is the Residue of Design

Running through the approaches in all three locales is the importance of earning a seat at the table. Any CEO would fire a consultant who offered boilerplate solutions without taking the time to understand the business and its culture, challenges, and market dynamics. Nothing is more certain to alienate educators and undermine the business community's efficacy than blustering, spouting clichés, or offering solutions without understanding the problems. In Austin, Nashville, and Massachusetts,

sustained, high-level engagement has built trust and a deep familiarity that fosters collaborative problem solving.

When it comes to municipal zoning or state tax policy, business leaders know that effective advocacy requires a grasp of the particulars, compelling data, political muscle, and strong working relationships. Yet, those same leaders sometimes treat K-12 schooling like a hobby, relying on homilies, good intentions, and inexperienced staff. It should be no surprise when local educators in those communities say, "We're the experts here, so why don't you just help us raise money and do what we ask?"

Across the three locales, when we asked about their successes, people mentioned good timing or good fortune. In Austin, Barry Mayer said, "We had a perfect storm in the early 2000s. Austin had gone through a huge recession, the dotcom bubble had burst, the employment base had dropped, and they weren't prepared.... A group of [business] visionaries got together, and said, 'What do we need to do to get back on track?'" In Nashville, Sydney Rogers said, "[Superintendent] Register was the right person



Nashville is recognized as a Next Generation Learning Community by the Ford Motor Company Fund in June 2010. From left to right: Connie Williams, executive director of the PENCIL Foundation; Dr. Jesse Register, director of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools; Cheryl Carrier, program director of 21st century education programs, Ford Motor Company Fund; Sydney Rogers, executive director, Alignment Nashville; and Ralph Schulz, president & CEO, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce. (Photo courtesy of Nashville Chamber)

at the right time. Some of this is having the right thing happen at the right time.” Jay Steele said, “Nashville had the perfect storm. There was an education mayor with a platform to transform schools, a Chamber with a president and education director who were on board,... structures...already in place, and...foundations and Alignment Nashville to bring MNPS together.” In Massachusetts, Henry Dinger said, “[I]t’s important to be lucky. With the success of the ’93 Ed Reform bill, we were lucky in the sense of timing. So much of what made reform a success was the willingness of the state legislature to fund it and increase it annually... and we were lucky to have an executive director who was knowledgeable and had credibility.”

Luck may have been a factor, but the reform efforts in these three locales also benefitted from dedicated business leadership, committed community actors, good working relationships, and educational expertise in the business community. These critical elements were in

place before things started to happen. The communities could seize opportunities because they had put themselves in a position to do so. In each case, business leaders talked seriously with educators and recruited respected professionals to lead the reform efforts. Reformers built sustainable structures, insisted on bringing top-level executives to the table, and stayed engaged. The business leadership addressed tough questions, understood that some steps would be political and unpopular, and took the heat when necessary.

In communities across America, business leaders recognize that K–12 schooling can and must do better. Yet, too often, their reform efforts have been scattershot. It is clearly possible to chart a new course towards transformational change. Business leaders who are serious about school reform need to roll up their sleeves, pull on some work boots, spit on their hands, and get to it.



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