

EDUCATION WEEK

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In Some Districts, Outside Groups Have Inside Track

Such ‘reform-support organizations’ gaining new policy attention.

By Jeff Archer

North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system got new leadership in August, but it wasn’t the superintendent or the school board. A civic group, Mecklenburg Citizens for Public Education, was launched with the aim of becoming a major player in district policy.



“We will, when appropriate, be critics of the school system,” said James Woodward, the group’s chairman and a retired chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. “But where structural weaknesses are identified, we will work hard, and with the system, to deal with them.”

If the organization lives up to its promise, it will join a growing number of local nonprofit groups around the country that are going far beyond fundraising and boosterism to play significant roles in constructing and driving their districts’ improvement agendas.

Sometimes called “reform-support organizations,” or RSOs, well-known examples have taken root in Boston, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Mobile, Ala. Some focus most on engaging the public; others on conducting research and development for district initiatives. Almost all analyze and report district performance data.

Aside from concentrating on systemwide issues, the common thread is RSOs’ relationship to their districts. Often described as “critical friends,” the groups are independent enough to point out problems, but they also work closely with school systems to arrive at solutions.

Risks and Benefits

Increasingly, experts see such organizations as not just helpful, but essential to sustaining improvement efforts in urban systems, in particular. Strategies left solely to those officially in charge of a district, they argue, can too easily fall prey to politics and leadership turnover.

“It’s astonishing how fast something that looks good can go away when the superintendent gets in trouble or the school board turns over,” said Paul T. Hill, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, located at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The relationships between district leaders and local reform-support groups can be difficult. For districts, cooperation often means giving outsiders access to information that results in unflattering analyses. Meanwhile, the most active organizations are sometimes accused of wielding too much influence.

But those risks are outweighed by the benefits, some superintendents say. Jesse B. Register, who recently retired as the superintendent of the Hamilton County, Tenn., district, which includes Chattanooga, said having an external partner allowed him to accomplish far more than he could have otherwise.

“The relationship there is what allowed us to be an innovative school system,” said Mr. Register, who is now a senior adviser at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, in Providence, R.I. “They were able to do things that we just didn’t have the capacity to do as a district.”

Education-oriented nonprofit organizations have long been part of the urban landscape, of course. The Ford Foundation seeded a national network of local education funds in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, “intermediaries” expanded across the country to manage grants from philanthropies for district-based projects.

But over time, some of those groups have evolved into such powerful actors in district improvement efforts that analysts consider them a distinct species. The Annenberg Institute helped coin the term reform-support organization a few years ago, in part to distinguish them and to call attention to the importance of their work.

“They galvanize diverse sectors of the community around a longer-term reform effort, and they’re willing to take a certain type of risk in both pushing and pulling,” said Robert A. Kronley, an Atlanta-based consultant who has studied and works with many such organizations.

Sharing the Load

Such a partnership emerged several years ago in Chattanooga, when a list of Tennessee’s lowest-performing schools included nine in Hamilton County. The Public Education Foundation, a local education fund, coordinated much of the district’s response.

Working with the district, area donors, and other local leaders, the group helped craft a multipronged plan that included new teacher training and financial incentives for the most highly skilled educators to come work in—and stay at—the schools on the state watch list. ("**Charging the Gap**," March 1, 2006.)

The foundation also did much of the data analysis that showed the extent to which teacher turnover had been a problem in those schools, and it arranged for the videotaping of effective teachers as a way to capture and spread their practices throughout the 40,500-student district.

“Running a school district is exhausting,” said Dan Challener, the Public Education Foundation’s president. “We want to try to create some opportunities and some knowledge-sharing that they, in their 16-hour days, often can’t get to.”

In Alabama, Mobile County district chief Harold Dodge enlisted the Mobile Area Education Foundation in 2001 to organize communitywide discussions around forming a new improvement plan for the 65,000-student district. The process involved 1,500 community members.

Mr. Dodge said the exercise has helped him make the case for change. When he decided to shift more resources to the highest-poverty schools, he could point out that community members had sent a clear message about the need to better serve the most disadvantaged students.

“Without that, it would have been us telling the community what the prescription was,” said Mr. Dodge, adding that the foundation now is coordinating a second series of community forums to inform an updated district strategic plan.

Such partnerships necessarily engender some friction. In 1999, the Boston Plan for Excellence sparked debate when it released a study—carried out with the district’s cooperation—that

sharply criticized spending on teacher training in the 58,000-student district.

BPE Executive Director Ellen Guiney said the willingness to critique is so important to her group's ability to add value to district policy, in fact, that she doesn't like the label reform-support organization—even though the Boston Plan is often called one.

“It connotes that the district has a reform, and we support it,” she said. “Sometimes we don't actually support the reforms, because we don't think the evidence has been marshaled to say that that's the right direction to go in.”

Restoring Trust?

The Boston Plan's findings that the district spent most of its professional-development dollars on activities with little relation to the system's instructional-improvement goals wound up laying the groundwork for Boston to direct more money toward on-the-job coaching for teachers.

Civic leaders in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community say their district is ripe for an active, outside partner. Despite some success in raising student achievement over the past decade, local voters last year signaled discontent by rejecting a major school construction bond.

Mr. Woodward, the chairman of the new civic group there, said he hopes the organization can restore public trust in the district by both finding ways to address its deficiencies and by spreading the word of its successes.

“This new organization will not serve its purpose if it's just running programs,” he said. “It will be focused on what are the structural issues that are impeding continued development of this school system, and what are the issues that must be dealt with to reduce the stresses that resulted in the failure of the bond issue.”

The former university chancellor, who is still raising start-up money, said he expects to announce a full board of directors shortly that will have broad representation from the community, including business and parent leaders.

A number of existing education groups, including a local education fund, are being merged into the new organization.

Peter Gorman, the superintendent of the 129,000-student Charlotte-Mecklenburg system, said he doesn't feel threatened by the prospect of having such an influential group in his district. Better to have a critical friend, he suggested, than no friend at all.

“What type of environment would you rather be in—one where people have given up on public education?” said the district chief. “I'll take people talking about it and me being perhaps concerned about them pushing an agenda over people not caring.”

Coverage of district-level improvement efforts is underwritten in part by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

PHOTO: George Austin, right, leads a September conversation of members of the Mobile, Ala., community focused on the school district. The Mobile Area Education Foundation has helped the district gather reaction to its strategic plan through such meetings.

—File photo by Victor Calhoun/Press-Register

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

"Charging the Gap," March 1, 2006.

"Local Funds Playing Larger Roles in Reform," May 26, 1999.

For more stories on this topic see **Leadership**.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Comprehensive School Reform** and **Leadership**.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about the work the **Annenberg Institute for School Reform** does for districts and communities, including its **district** and **municipal and community** support systems.

Get more information on the **Public Education Foundation's** research that focused on **highly effective teaching** in Tennessee.

The **Boston Plan for Excellence** offers more information on **school reform in Boston**, including reports on the first 10 years of reform efforts in the city's schools.

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