

Reducing the Achievement Gap Through District/Union Collaboration:

THE TALE OF TWO SCHOOL DISTRICTS SUMMARY REPORT



REDUCING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH DISTRICT/UNION COLLABORATION:

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has challenged the nation to assure that every child has "competent, caring, qualified teachers in schools organized for success."¹ It is a goal that has become the law of the land, through the *No Child Left Behind* legislation that requires all schools to be staffed by high quality teachers and all schools to meet adequate yearly progress. These goals are critical to our nation's economic success, cultural advancement, and moral core. Turning goals into reality is no easy task, and districts around the country are struggling every day with this challenge.

In looking for examples of districts that were making gains both in assuring teacher quality and in reducing gaps in student achievement, we continually came to Clark County, Nevada and Hamilton County, Tennessee. While the road to reform and the specific steps each district took were different, they shared a fundamental element – in both districts, success can be directly linked to the collaboration of the local teachers' union and the school district. Single-minded focus on improving student achievement and a willingness to be flexible allowed these two, often adversarial, groups to work together with outstanding results. Their stories are proof that unions and districts can collaborate successfully to improve student achievement. Clark County and Hamilton County also provide guidance to other districts as they seek support in teaching and learning for all.

¹National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. *What Matters Most, Teaching for America's Future* (New York: Teachers College, 1996).

IN THE BEGINNING... THE HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF COLLABORATION

While Clark County and Hamilton County both benefited from the critical collaboration of their respective unions and district administrators, they came to reform from two very different starting points:

CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA

- The school district was experiencing exponential annual growth:
 - 12,000 to 13,000 additional students
 - 1,800 to 2,500 new teachers
 - Eight to 18 new schools opening
- More than half of its schools were designated “at-risk”²;
- It experienced significant teacher turnover; in 2004-2005 over 1,100 teachers left the Clark County School System;
- There was a history of turbulent, often adversarial relations between the union and the school district, with most negotiations ending in arbitration;
- The union lost 1,700 union (CCEA) members in a 2 year period;
- The district had an inequitable distribution of experienced, high quality teachers across all schools; and,
- The district’s human resource strategy was focused on recruitment, not on teacher turnover and its causes.

Clark County’s challenge was adding and retaining high quality teachers, and assuring the equitable distribution of those high quality teachers, in a fast growing urban system.

Clark County reached a turning point in their reform efforts when a new school district chief negotiator was appointed in 2002-2003 — and she and the Clark County Education Association negotiator agreed to try Interest Based Bargaining.

HAMILTON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

- In 1998, City and County school systems merged, bringing together two very different districts:
 - 4.1% of students in Hamilton County were African American compared to 62.9% in Chattanooga;
 - 6.5% of Hamilton County schools participated in the Title I program compared to 30.8% in Chattanooga. Of these, 92.3% of Hamilton County Title I schools were meeting expectations compared to 20% of those in Chattanooga;
 - 19.9% of students in Hamilton County were eligible for free and reduced lunch compared to 59% in Chattanooga;
- Nine of the lowest performing schools in the State of Tennessee were located within the borders of the City of Chattanooga;
- Teachers in the lowest performing schools were extremely dissatisfied, often transferring out of these schools in the fall and leaving them without a full teaching staff for several weeks of a new school year.

Hamilton County’s challenge was gaining teacher buy-in and leadership support for K-12 systemic change that closes achievement gaps.

Hamilton County reached a turning point in their reform efforts when union and district leaders began to successfully collaborate on a sustained basis that attracted the interest and support of a critical group of community partners and funders.

²Schools are ranked and labeled at-risk on the basis of the following factors: number of students receiving Free and Reduced lunches; rate of student transience; school size; number of English Language Learner students; number of student not meeting proficiency in math and reading tests. If there are limited special resources, they are distributed as far down the list as is possible.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

A major factor in the reform success of Hamilton County and Clark County was the districts and their teachers' unions utilizing Interest Based Bargaining (IBB), a powerful tool that enables those negotiating to become joint problem solvers. IBB is a negotiation strategy in which parties collaborate to find a "win-win" solution to their dispute. This strategy focuses on developing mutually beneficial agreements based on the interests of all parties³.



The Power of Collaboration: Interest Based Bargaining

To make the difference between interest-based bargaining and adversarial bargaining concrete, the following example uses a tangible object as the focus of negotiations.

Assume there is one orange and four people who want it. In adversarial bargaining, there would be heated discussions of rights and expectations, each side clamoring for the orange, demanding that the other side give in. Each party becomes more and more tied to its position, demanding concessions or surrender from the other. The result would likely require arbitration by an "impartial" arbitrator. The arbitrator would listen to the presentations of both sides and award the orange to one of the parties. One side would win; the other would lose. Only one party's goals and needs would be met, and there would be no basis for doing anything differently the next time.

In contrast, Interest Based Bargaining begins with the questions, "What are the interests or issues that are important to each party?" and "Why are those issues important?" The parties become joint problem solvers, searching together for workable solutions, which will meet the needs, satisfy the desires, address the concerns, or allay the fears of each party.

If four people want the orange, the first question would be, "Why is having the orange important to you?" Perhaps in that discussion they would learn that one person wants the orange to demonstrate his juggling skill to a friend; the second wants the juice for his child; the third wants the seeds to plant; and the fourth wants the inner skin for a fiber-rich snack. Together they would brainstorm possible ways to meet all of their needs and then apply mutually agreed upon criteria for evaluating all possible solutions.

After going through the process, they might decide to give the first person 30 minutes to use the orange to demonstrate his juggling skill; then cut the orange and squeeze the juice out for the second party; give the seeds to the third party; and give the remaining hull of the orange to the fourth party.

In this case, all parties got what they needed. Everyone's goals were met and they all came away pleased with the outcome as well as the process. Because they all had a positive experience, they could build upon this trust for the next "negotiations" session and follow the same process.

³Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. *Interest-Based Bargaining*. Retrieved October 18, 2007 from <http://www.fmcs.gov/internet/itemDetail.asp?categoryID=131&itemID=15804>

THE ELEMENTS AND PROCESS OF COLLABORATION



The Power of Collaboration: Achieving Meaningful Reform in Clark County, Nevada

Clark County is a tremendous example of what can happen when the union and district join forces in the name of student achievement. CCEA and CCSD significantly changed school culture by working together to bring about reforms that supported teachers and improved teaching conditions and student achievement. These reforms include:

Grievance Resolution: This key aspect of the CCEA and CCSD collaboration means that most contract disputes are resolved before they reach the grievance stage.

Waiver Process: School staff are able to get waivers on many contract provisions, which creates flexibility to improve instruction and student achievement.

Assessing the Work Climate: The union /district collaboration led to several systems for evaluating and responding to staff concerns.

Creating Empowerment Schools: Functioning as a school design team, principals and teachers in eight schools were given the freedom to make creative use of calendar, staffing, governance, instructional programs, professional development and budget resources. They also designed a “pay for performance” program that was agreed to by CCEA and CCSD.

Addressing Teacher Isolation: Over 100 schools in Clark County are actively participating in developing mentoring and support strategies to help new teachers become part of their school.


Mentoring and Support in the Northeast Region—The Urban Teacher Program: The collaboration of union and district officials led to significant focus and professional development in the area of the county with the largest percentage of minority and low-income students.

Mentoring in 95 High Attrition, At-risk Schools: Mentoring programs were established in these schools thanks to the collaboration of the union and the school district and special state funds made available for this purpose.

Early Transfer/Early Hiring Provisions for At-Risk Schools: Principals of at-risk schools are allowed to begin the transfer and new hire periods two months before other schools, giving them an opportunity to build strong staffs.

Salary Placement for New Teachers with No Experience: The CCEA and CCSD came together to improve starting salaries for teachers, making the district more attractive to high quality, novice teachers.

Creation of the Expanded Salary Schedule: Senior teachers were given financial incentives to achieve advanced degrees, pursue additional course work, and continue working in the district.



The Power of Collaboration: Snapshot of School Reform in Hamilton County, Tennessee

Hamilton County has achieved district wide reforms that improved teaching and learning. These gains were a direct result of the collaboration between the union and the school district and the community-wide partnership that developed to support their work.

- Teacher transfers became more efficient and more supportive of staffing all schools with good teachers, particularly those with a history of low levels of student achievement.
- Pay incentives were implemented to award high-performing teachers and schools.
- Site-based school planning was implemented to support systemic goals, with school leadership teams throughout the district.
- Waivers were granted to allow flexibility at the school level to meet the needs of students.
- Central office positions were eliminated and funds were used to create school-based positions to support teaching and learning.
- Change Coaches were put into place in all middle and high schools.
- Teams were developed across grade levels and within role-alike groups to support teaching and learning.
- Principal networks have been established at each educational level within the district, elementary, middle and high school.
- Family support specialists serve as a liaison between middle schools and families.
- Small learning communities were developed in all high schools.
- High school curricular and graduation requirements were increased for all students.
- A "vertical team" that includes a high school and all of the elementary and middle schools that feed into it, has been established in one feeder alignment to ensure every kindergarten student graduates from high school with his or her classmates.
- Analysis and use of data to support instruction is a norm throughout the district and is supported by analysts whose job it is to support administrators, teachers and families as they seek to understand and effectively use data.
- Evaluation was built into reform, with feedback from all stakeholders collected and valued.

THE RESULTS AND OUTCOMES OF COLLABORATION

Both the Clark County and Hamilton County School Districts have made impressive improvements in teacher quality and significant gains in student achievement since implementing a collaborative reform effort.

In **Clark County**, the number of schools meeting AYP increased by 12 percent (from 183 in 2005 to 216 in 2006) and the number of schools **not** meeting AYP decreased from 149 in 2005 to 123 in 2006. Additionally, the number of high performing schools increased, with schools designated as "exemplary" increasing from six in 2005 to 11 in 2006 and schools designated as "high achieving" increasing from 34 in 2005 to 44 in 2006. Clark County schools also experienced significant improvements (as high as 14 percent) in mathematics and reading scores in every grade from 3rd to 8th.

During the past three years, the percentage of high school graduates passing the Nevada High School Math Proficiency exam has increased, and the drop out rate of 9th – 12th grade students has decreased. The number of advanced and honors diplomas awarded have increased (more than 4,400 out of 11,642 diplomas awarded) as have the number of scholarships awarded (an increase of \$10.5 million).

Hamilton County has achieved great success in shrinking the achievement gaps and improving student achievement at all levels. In 1999, 12 percent of 3rd grade students in the Benwood schools (schools ranked worst in the city and part of a major reform effort funded by the Benwood Foundation) were reading at proficient or advanced levels. By 2003, more than half (53 percent) achieved this level -- and by 2006, almost three-quarters (73 percent) had reached the proficient or advanced levels. Additionally, in 2002, the first year in which the union agreed to the "reconstitution" of struggling schools and to the bonuses to attract and retain teachers at these schools, the number of teachers new to their schools reached an all-time high of 31.4 percent. By 2005, that number had dropped to 17.9 percent.

Since reform efforts began in 2003, the percentage of middle school students scoring advanced and proficient in reading/language arts has risen across Hamilton County, but particularly in high needs schools. A 25.9 percentage point achievement gap in 2003 was reduced to a 19.9 percent gap in 2006. In those three years, the achievement gap in middle school math dropped from 25.8 percent to 17.4 percent.

Finally, Hamilton County high schools are also making gains in promotion rates, on-time graduation rates, and numbers of graduates enrolled in college. The percent of ninth grade students receiving a “proficient” or “advanced” rating on the Algebra Gateway exam rose, as did performance of tenth graders on the English Gateway exams.

LESSONS FROM THE TWO DISTRICTS

Clark County and Hamilton County came to reform on different paths, and the reforms they implemented were unique, yet the lessons drawn from their stories will resonate with other districts seeking to improve education for all students. The following points will help guide school districts and teachers’ unions as they seek to collaborate and achieve systemic school reform.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

1. Systemic reform cannot take place without the active formal and informal involvement of the district administration and the education association (union). That point cannot be stressed enough; every other lesson flows from it. These two groups are the core of the reform effort, and their cooperation forms the foundation upon which other partners and funders are willing to invest the time and resources in working with the district.

2. All stakeholders must have a comprehensive, common vision that focuses on student learning and is guided by instructional improvement. This common vision must be the focus of the reform plan, implementation design, investment of resources, professional development, monitoring, and assessments. It must be revisited regularly and modified as necessary throughout the process. The core of this vision for change must be the shared belief that all children—whatever their ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural background or prior academic success—can attain high levels of academic achievement.

3. It is extremely useful to create a dedicated time and retreat space where the key stakeholders can initially meet to work out the details of the reform plan. In the case of Hamilton County, the NEA’s Challenge of Change Conference provided a place away from normal day-to-day operations where the key parties were able to get to know and trust one another. In Clark County, the time together learning to use the IBB provided that time and space.

4. Interest Based Bargaining creates a sound structure for working through issues and goals. IBB shifts the focus of negotiations to the shared goal of student achievement. It is critical that all key stakeholders participate in the IBB training program. Those who find they cannot support the process should withdraw from the process. If a person who must withdraw has a key leadership position (i.e. superintendent, assistant superintendent of instruction, association president or UniServ Director), the capacity to collaborate may be in question and must be reconsidered.

5. All stakeholders must recognize and respect the fragile, critical and essential nature of trust relationships and must actively work to protect and nurture this trust, especially at the beginning of the process. They must be willing to share needed information. If it is not possible to share certain kinds information, the



- A supportive induction process aimed at enhancing novice teacher effectiveness.
- Principals, assistant principals and other instructional leaders who focus on student success as the underlying goal of all activity, in an environment in which teachers hold themselves professionally accountable, and are treated fairly with respect as team members and encouraged to continually learn and improve their teaching.
- Frequent examination of the research on reform and consideration of how it informs local efforts.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT POLICY CHANGE

This work is not easy, and the job is a constant one. But policy is a lever for institutionalizing change. Clearly the achievements made in Clark County and Hamilton County were the result of significant changes in policy brought about by strong, effective collaboration. The list below highlights some of the partners, their roles and the policies that make change happen.

THE DISTRICT: STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

1. Superintendents and school boards alone are not enough to sustain a reform effort. Creating and building upon a district's vision must, from the beginning, involve the full range of stakeholders: education associations' leadership and members, parents, community members, and outside funders.
2. District leadership must create an expectation among all staff that reforms can and must succeed, demonstrating a commitment to sustain and support the vision and resulting policies and actions over the long haul, irrespective of changes in personnel.
3. The district must be open and willing to share information with stakeholders and to accept them at the table as meaningful partners.
4. Districts must be prepared to review and to reorganize their structure, their staff assignments, their resource allocation methodology, and their data collection and dissemination methods to support reform efforts.

THE ASSOCIATION: STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

1. Education associations must recognize that if reform efforts are going to succeed, they must be ready, willing and able to come to the table to find ways of improving schools for the sake of all children.
2. They must be willing to be active, participating partners in the reform effort—willing to consider contractual changes, pay incentives, changes to transfer procedures, and other key negotiation elements.
3. They must be willing to restructure their operations, staff and governance roles as necessary.
4. Among members and potential members, the association must be ready to establish itself—and its brand—as the trusted source for bringing teachers' professional knowledge to reform efforts and for taking initiative to support teaching and learning conditions that close achievement gaps and improve student achievement.
5. They must be ready to demonstrate to veteran teachers why the association is involved in the new focus of reform and building professional capacity rather than focusing only on hours, money and due process rights.
6. They must be ready to demonstrate to less experienced teachers that the education association is a key partner in helping them to be effective in the classroom and to help their students achieve.

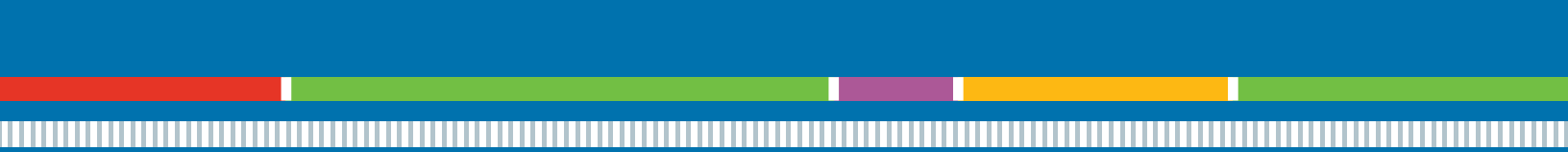
OUTSIDE FUNDERS: STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

1. The leadership from outside funders must be ready to become partners in the effort to improve teaching and learning, ensuring results and equity. From the inception of reform initiatives, this partnership should include the education association.
2. The outside funder should be ready to serve as an objective “critical friend,” convener, facilitator and change agent.
3. Outside funders should work to build their own capacity to be supportive of reform efforts in which they participate and to adapt their own approaches to meet a district’s particular circumstance and needs.
4. Outside funders should be willing to join others who come to the table to build a synergy and to leverage the resources available. When national funders consider joining or establishing local reform collaborations, they should first reach out to local funders and work with existing partnerships.
5. Outside funders should make the success of the reform effort their highest priority.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At the heart of this report is the challenge of change. School districts must constantly evolve if they are to meet the needs of their changing student body. Change can be chaotic, disruptive, and destructive, or it can be harnessed to become a coherent, engaging and constructive process. Clark and Hamilton counties took the latter path, rising to the occasion with creativity and determination to build better schools, ensuring that improved student achievement would be the ultimate outcome of their reform efforts. Their stories—the tale of these two districts—stand as evidence that, with strong collaboration among key partners, dedicated education leaders can improve learning opportunities for every child in their community.

For more on how Clark County and Hamilton County made dramatic gains in student achievement through union and school district collaboration, NCTAF’s full report *Reducing The Achievement Gap Through District/Union Collaboration: The Tale of Two School Districts* may be found at http://www.nctaf.org/resources/research_and_reports/nctaf_research_reports/index.htm



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