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Local Accountability

An Untapped Strategy for
Advancing Student Achievement in
Massachusetts Public Schools

A Series of Three MassINC Policy Reports



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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February 2019

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Series Executive Summary

In exchange for additional state funding, Massachusetts' landmark 1993 Education Reform Act (MERA) placed more accountability on public schools to improve student outcomes. Twenty-six years later, our public schools indisputably require another significant infusion of state resources. Once again, many believe these additional dollars ought to come with a higher level of accountability. We absolutely agree. However, the three papers in this collection make a compelling case that the locus of greater accountability should be at the community level.

Our perspective on the need for more local accountability is fresh and complex, and can be summarized as follows:

- For the first paper in this series, which frames the entire discussion, we partnered with experts at the Center for Assessment to carefully define and unpack the promise of local accountability as a tool for improving educational outcomes, particularly in Gateway Cities, which are home to a disproportionate share of schools designated by the state as underperforming.

The key insight from this framing paper is that the strategic drive for school improvement is greatly enhanced when communities develop accountability provisions of their own to complement and augment state and federal policies.

For nearly three decades, education policymakers have focused on strengthening external accountability provided by the state, through MERA, and by the federal government, through the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Now that the state and federal governments have stepped up, we argue that policymakers must shift their lens and focus on communities, which have a better handle on prevailing conditions, values, strengths, and challenges locally.

NCLB's successor, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), moved federal policy modestly in this direction. However, far more attention is needed at both the state and federal level to help communities realize the untapped potential of local accountability.

- To gauge the current state of local accountability practices, the second paper in this series examines Gateway City school and district improvement plans, which are regularly produced for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as required by MERA, NCLB, and now ESSA. We also reviewed recent Gateway City superintendent evaluations. Our analysis of these documents reveals several concerning patterns:

Gateway Cities are not furthering state and federal school accountability measures by clearly delineating and communicating the progress they seek to make in these areas. In the sample of Gateway City plans that we analyzed, two-thirds of district and half of school improvement plans contained no measurable goals with respect to actual student outcomes.

Gateway Cities are not augmenting state accountability with performance measures of their own. Approximately three-quarters of recent school (69 percent) and district (76 percent) plans did not include any measureable student learning goals that were not already present in the state's accountability formula.

Superintendent evaluations provide another indication that local accountability practices are underdeveloped in Gateway Cities. A majority (7 of 13) of the superintendent evaluations we analyzed contained no measurable goals related to student learning outcomes.

Major Findings

- The strategic drive for school improvement is greatly enhanced when communities develop local accountability provisions of their own to complement and augment state and federal policies. Gateway Cities are not exercising local accountability by clearly delineating and communicating the progress they seek to make in their school and district improvement plans.
- In the sample of Gateway City plans that we analyzed, two-thirds of district and half of school improvement plans contained no measurable goals with respect to actual student outcomes. Approximately three-quarters of school (69 percent) and district (76 percent) plans did not include any measurable student learning goals that were not already present in the state's accountability formula.
- Superintendent evaluations provide another indication that local accountability practices are underdeveloped in Gateway Cities. A majority (7 of 13) of the superintendent evaluations we analyzed contained no measurable goals related to student learning outcomes.
- Gateway City school committees are not in a strong position to exercise local accountability. While two-thirds of Gateway City students are nonwhite and 80 percent of Gateway City educators are female, nonwhite members hold only 11 percent of seats on Gateway City school committees and females make up less than 40 percent of Gateway City school committee members. More than half of Gateway City school committees have no nonwhite members.
- Gateway City school councils are likely similarly ill-positioned to exercise local accountability. Fewer than one-third of respondents to our statewide school council survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that the council they serve on has influence over the hiring of principals or decisions regarding the school budget. Only 15 percent agree when asked if their council shapes curriculum, and just 12 percent report influence over the hiring of teachers. Even in operational areas that seem particularly suited to school council involvement, such as engaging community partners and communicating strategic priorities to parents, less than half of members surveyed agree that their council performs such functions.

- The third paper in this series looks at governing institutions with primary responsibility for exercising local accountability at both the school (school councils) and the district (school committees) levels. We find that current practices and structural conditions leave these institutions ill-positioned to provide strategic oversight in a manner that complements and augments state and federal accountability.

In contrast to state and federal accountability, which achieve force largely through sanctions for underperformance, local accountability relies heavily on providing transparency and establishing buy-in for priorities that reflect the aspirations and values of the community. District governing bodies that are neither representative of the students served nor the educators employed will find it extremely hard to get purchase from local accountability through these means. In this regard, our findings reveal stark imbalances that merit immediate attention:

While two-thirds of Gateway City students are nonwhite and 80 percent of Gateway City educators are female, nonwhite members hold only 11 percent of seats on Gateway City school committees and females make up less than 40 percent of Gateway City school committee members. More than half of Gateway City school committees have no nonwhite members.

Our analysis of school site councils—the bodies charged with working with principals to develop school improvement plans under MERA—also reveals deep structural concerns:

Fewer than one-third of respondents to our school council survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that the council they serve on has influence over the hiring of principals or decisions regarding the school budget. Only 15 percent agree when asked if their council shapes curriculum, and just 12 percent report influence over the hiring of teachers. Even in operational areas that seem particularly suited to school council involvement, such as engaging community partners and communicating strategic priorities to parents, less than half of members surveyed agree that their council performs such functions.

With the exception of these school council survey data, our analysis reports findings only for Gateway Cities.¹ However, it is likely that school and district plans from communities throughout Massachusetts lack measurable student outcomes, as educators have generally come to see the prepara-

tion of these required documents as primarily a compliance exercise. Without plans that clearly delineate local priorities, focus resources on achieving them, and establish expectations for the intended result, a culture of local accountability for continuously improving student outcomes is unlikely to take root within communities.

Just as athletes must evenly strengthen flexors and extensors to keep the body in balance, schools need internal controls as well as external oversight to function in a healthy manner. We urge cities and towns throughout the Commonwealth to reflect on both the framing paper that describes the merits of local accountability in public education generally, as well as our Gateway City findings, and ask whether their communities would benefit from rethinking how they exercise local control in the governance of their educational systems.

Why Gateway Cities Must Act on These Findings Now

We urge Gateway City leaders to approach the issues raised here with great immediacy, both because these communities will be disproportionately affected by the unfolding policy conversation about additional state support for high-need schools, and because local accountability, implemented well, holds considerable promise on three fronts that are especially critical to Gateway Cities:

1. *Achieving equitable educational outcomes.*

Racial and ethnic achievement gaps are not policy abstractions in Gateway Cities. Closing these gaps is paramount to the future of their local and regional economies. Gateway City schools educate one-quarter of public school students in Massachusetts, and they are home to nearly half (43 percent) of the state's nonwhite students.

Students of color are unlikely to achieve at their full potential when they attend schools with governing bodies that are not fully attuned to their needs and aspirations, and unwilling to make hard and fast commitments to continuously improve learning outcomes. While state and federal accountability is designed to provide protections for these students, it has real limitations. Gateway City leaders must recognize that local accountability—and the strong governing bodies necessary to deliver it—can play a central role improving educational outcomes for children who are vital to their future prosperity.

The Planning Process: Key Terms

School Councils and School Improvement Plans

- School Councils develop annual school improvement plans that should include measurable strategic goals. Superintendents approve these plans, after consultation with the school committee.

- School Councils are composed of principals, teachers, parents, community members, and students (in the case of high schools).

School Committees and District Improvement Plans

- School Committees approve district improvement plans every three years.

- School committees also conduct superintendent evaluations. According to regulation, superintendents must set measurable goals for themselves related to student learning; school committees must consider progress on these goals in their evaluation of superintendent performance

2. *Providing deeper learning and wraparound support.*

There is no question that external state and federal accountability policy has led to improvement in Gateway City school performance. As noted in a 2013 MassINC report, Gateway City students taking the MCAS test in 2003 scored significantly below their peers in Massachusetts; spurred by state and federal accountability policies, by 2012 Gateway City schools had entirely closed this performance gap.² Gateway City schools also made considerable progress toward increasing high school graduation rates, on which state and federal accountability policy places heavy emphasis. The class of 2017's four-year graduation rate was nearly 80 percent, up from 66 percent in 2006.

But these gains are not translating into post-secondary attainment gains and the substantial earnings increases that come with higher education. Three-quarters of Gateway City students entering the ninth grade in 2006 completed high school, but fewer than one-third (29 percent) went on to earn a post-secondary degree or credential. As a result, the economic fundamentals of Gateway Cities are not moving in line with accountability-driven educational gains: the number of Gateway City residents living in poverty has grown by 25 percent since 2000.

In these reports, we examine the myriad ways that local accountability policies can ensure that graduates are prepared for college, career, and civic life—with knowledge and understanding that will always remain out of reach for state and federal accountability policy. Using local accountability policies to define what success looks like for graduates is imperative given our rapidly changing economy. Communities must be in the lead, continuously monitoring the success of their students and adjusting the systems and interventions they have in place accordingly.

3. Proving that Gateway City schools are providing high-quality learning experiences to all students.

Under federal accountability laws, the state is required to rank all schools using a one-size-fits-all formula that does not accurately distill the performance of inclusive urban schools. The result is persistent communications by public education agencies that weakens already fragile real-estate markets in Gateway Cities. This has significant fiscal consequences because these communities depend heavily on residential property to generate revenue, especially in comparison to major cities, which can draw on large commercial tax bases. With less revenue to fund public schools and maintain neighborhoods, state and federal accountability formulas that undermine urban communities can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As noted in a recent MassINC report, the number of Gateway City residents living in unstable high-poverty neighborhoods has more than doubled to 165,000 since 2000.³ Study after study demonstrates how these environments undermine resident well-being and keep youth from reaching their full potential. While many factors are at play in the concentration of poverty in Gateway Cities, this trend accelerated dramatically after the passage of MERA and NCLB. Between the 1993 and 2013, the share of Gateway City students who were low income rose from less than half (42 percent) to more than two-thirds (66 percent).

To counter these trends and the narratives that further them, Gateway Cities require local accountability systems that convincingly demonstrate that they are communities where leaders have uniquely high expectations for student achievement and shared determination to achieve them.

A Plan of Action for Local Accountability

When we set out on this project in the fall of 2017, our primary objective was to describe “local accountability” and to stimulate dialogue over its principles, with the intention of gathering policy recommendations for the future. However, the power of the data we assembled over the past year suggests that more immediate action is warranted, particularly since policymakers are seeking strategies for injecting new resources into public education. We offer six recommendations for consideration at this pivotal juncture:

1. Incentivize high-quality school and district improvement planning.

State leaders can signal to communities that local accountability is valued by encouraging schools and districts to approach improvement planning with independence and initiative, rather than as a matter of compliance. Moving in this direction would not require a significant outlay of resources. The state could incentivize this practice by simply offering schools and districts that submit high-quality plans relief from other DESE reporting requirements. The state could also offer bonus points for schools and districts that take on extra responsibility for improving student outcomes under its next ESSA plan.

2. Deploy new models to help communities enhance school and district improvement planning practices.

Incentives to approach school and district improvement planning as a true local accountability practice must be accompanied by strategies that position schools to carry out this activity effectively. From school-based inquiry teams, which help school leaders interpret data and establish goals, to networks of schools with common designs that work together to strategize and continuously improve, Massachusetts should help more communities adopt models that have a demonstrated record of positioning schools and districts to develop and implement data-driven plans.

3. Use additional Chapter 70 funds to support innovation.

To improve student outcomes, schools need reliable multi-year funding to adequately resource and staff complex initiatives that result in systemic change. The current practice of supporting new initiatives with small and unpredictable state grants is widely seen as inefficient and unproductive. To remain ahead of the curve in education, Massachusetts needs to set aside some of its education funds for ambitious change

efforts that have an upfront cost. Rather than limiting communities to investments in a set of discrete practices predetermined by the state, this fund should offer communities wide latitude to sow innovation. To encourage local accountability practice, applications for these grants should be judged on both the merits of the proposed intervention and the overall quality of the school and district improvement plans.

4. Make schools a breeding ground for civic leadership.

Leadership development is absolutely essential to the fate of Gateway Cities. Access to both youth and young parents gives public school systems the deepest reach into the community, making it possible to connect with and prepare the next generation of civic leaders. School councils, which provide many residents with formative leadership positions, offer a particularly alluring opportunity. The state can support efforts to nurture parents who serve on school councils by simply making membership lists accessible so that existing training programs for urban leaders can target them. In the context of policy discussion around local accountability, it is also important to acknowledge the leadership void left by the decline of community newspapers. Tapping parents to serve as citizen journalists is another creative strategy worthy of pursuit.

5. Reinvigorate and empower school councils.

Incentivizing the development of strong school improvement plans and preparing schools council members to serve will go a long way toward empowering these bodies to play a more central role in school governance. However, the state should also take more direct steps to position school councils to assume the functions MERA envisioned. Making school council stewardship a core component of principal evaluation is one meaningful change the state could make. The state could also allow schools in networks to substitute the network's governing board for the school council. This change could position more schools to adopt sophisticated assessment and accountability systems aligned with their curriculum and design.

6. Support efforts to develop new governance models at the community level.

Structural challenges that undermine the performance of school committees must be addressed. At a minimum, it seems logical to eliminate all at-large structures and move school committee elections to even-year higher-turnout elections. However, it would likely be difficult to carry out such change. We should think long and hard about how to position Gateway Cities to go a step further if they are going to mount campaigns to modernize their governing bodies.

For urban school systems, really bold governance change would reorganize boards to better position leaders to work across sectors to problem-solve and meet local needs. With a hybrid body made up of elected and appointed members, these boards can preserve important democratic processes and integrate professional perspectives from those involved in their local early childhood, afterschool, community health, workforce, and higher education systems. A body with this makeup would have more stability, and it would be far more likely to set transparent goals and hold leaders accountable for achieving them. It would also elevate issues relating to youth in the community, and give candidates waging campaigns for elected positions on this board the ability to surface ideas for improving learning opportunities and youth development outcomes more broadly.

Notes

- 1 Due to the difficulty of identifying school site council members, we relied on a statewide sample of parents, teachers, principals, and community partners serving on these bodies. However, the results indicate that these bodies are extremely weak with very little variation across communities.
- 2 See *The Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning Systems* (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2013).
- 3 Ben Forman and Alan Mallach. *Building Communities of Promise and Possibility: State and Local Blueprints for Comprehensive Neighborhood Stabilization* (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2019).

Local Accountability

The Forgotten Element
in Education Reform

Part One in a Series of Three Papers

Benjamin Forman
Charles DePascale
and Chris Domaleski

Introduction

The old adage “what gets measured is what gets done” has become a common refrain in education circles. This is especially true in urban districts, which face intense pressure to raise test scores under high-stakes state and federal accountability structures. Many educators serving these communities lament that test-based accountability has had unintended effects, noting that courses and programs that are important to lifelong well-being have gone by the wayside as schools triage resources to increase performance on standardized tests used for accountability.¹

The concerns urban educators raise are supported by a growing body of evidence which suggests that these tests alone cannot address the broad set of skills necessary for post-secondary success.² However, urban educators also recognize that state and federal accountability has brought much needed attention and urgency to school improvement; simply relaxing state and federal accountability is unlikely to lead to better outcomes, particularly for students of color, low-income students, and English learners.³

With the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), Congress worked to achieve a more balanced approach to determining school performance by requiring states to include a “fifth indicator.”⁴ However, limitations within ESSA severely constrained what states could measure within this indicator and how much influence it could have in calculating school rankings.⁵

The set of measures Massachusetts uses to determine school performance may adequately signal situations that merit higher levels of state attention, but these measures alone will not help schools focus on a more complete set of high-quality educational experiences. There is room to improve the state accountability systems created under ESSA. However, there will always be significant limitations on what states can accomplish in a single, state-centric system designed to function uniformly across all schools and districts. States cannot and should not carry singular responsibility for accountability. It is incumbent

on communities to use the authority local control affords them to develop a robust set of complementary indicators, and to make these additional learning outcomes a high priority.

Some urban districts are already moving in this direction, but so far they have been mostly the largest systems, such as Chicago and New York. The local approaches these systems have adopted to determine school quality largely mirror the state and federal approach (i.e., rating systems generated top-down by district offices that include few robust measures of student learning outcomes beyond standardized test scores).⁶

The promise of “local accountability” lies in its far bolder approach, which could do two things: 1) align K–12 instruction and learning with a wider set of core competencies, and 2) bridge gaps across youth-serving systems to ensure that learning is aligned and community resources flow toward strategic initiatives that are most likely to contribute to long-term outcomes.

While this more complete approach could provide real value in any community looking to ensure that its learning systems are seamless and continuously improving, local accountability offers a vital opportunity for Gateway Cities, where resources are extremely limited and disadvantaged students need a holistic set of learning opportunities and supports to reach their full potential in adulthood.

In many ways, Gateway Cities are already well-positioned to experiment with new forms of local accountability. Education leaders in these small-to-midsize urban districts have been thinking deeply about how to weave together the many institutions in their communities to create integrated systems, as documented in MassINC’s 2013 report *The Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning Systems*.⁷ Through the Working Cities Challenge, coordinated by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, many have built data-driven, cross-sector partnerships to accomplish shared goals.⁸

Early lessons can already be drawn from real examples of local accountability in Gateway Cities. These communities are home to many strong charter schools, which by design have more learning outcomes to report on and additional layers of accountability. Working with nonprofit partners, for example, Salem and Worcester recently developed highly visible strategic plans with detailed outcome measures. And through the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Educational Assessment (MCIEA), Lowell and Revere are developing new models for local education accountability.

This paper is the first in a series exploring how Gateway Cities can build on these examples to develop new models of local accountability that complement state and federal accountability and ensure that resources and attention flow to efforts that will have the most impact on long-term student outcomes. The pages that follow provide further context by looking at how policy developments have shifted responsibility for school performance back and forth between local, state, and federal authorities over time. Building on this history, we unpack the argument for local accountability at this juncture, and offer design principles and specific examples of measurable outcomes that communities may want to adopt in various domains.

We hope that this analysis will stimulate timely conversation about local accountability practices. In exchange for more re-

sources, Massachusetts's landmark 1993 Education Reform Act called for greater accountability, creating a paradigm that spread throughout the US. Twenty-five years later it is widely accepted that the state's public schools require another significant infusion of resources; once again, leaders are intimating that with these additional dollars must come an even higher level of accountability. This paper, along with two companion pieces that will follow, make a compelling case that the locus of this additional accountability should fall at the community level.

How Responsibility for Providing Education Accountability Has Shifted Over Time

Over the past two decades—through a combination of state and federal laws—the practice of holding schools and school districts responsible for student learning has come to rely heavily on two related components: 1) a set of measures developed by states (with federal oversight) to categorize the performance of schools and school districts, and 2) a set of actions associated with these performance ratings, which range from providing additional resources and autonomies to complete state takeovers through receivership.

The evolution of this hybrid state/federal accountability system has involved a dramatic departure for many states, where, until recently, public education has been largely a local re-

How do we define local accountability?

Education accountability is a term traditionally used to describe the process administered by states, under applicable federal law, to establish goals for student learning, indicators to identify how well schools and districts are performing relative to these goals, and the interventions that state education agencies will take when a school or district consistently underperforms.

While the term *local accountability* appears in many places, the concept has yet to be clearly defined. As a working definition, we use the term to refer to practices that give parents,

educators, and community members information to track progress toward strategic objectives (broadly related to learning and youth development) and hold each other mutually accountable for delivering results in these areas.

One might debate whether the word “accountability” is useful in this context. Contrasted with the state and federal variant, which can at times be high-stakes and punitive, the local approach should lean toward a more collaborative and learning-driven posture. The advantage to retaining the word is it positions the work as a complement

to the state and federal practice, and ensures that communities see the process as a solid commitment to achieving collaboratively agreed-upon goals. To be clear, we do not see local accountability as subordinate to federal and state systems. Rather, we urge the development of complementary and balanced systems that honor the core functions and roles of each level.

Over this series of three papers, we will build on this working definition and flesh out the concept of community-driven, local accountability from a variety of perspectives.

sponsibility. In Massachusetts that change was prominently ushered in with the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993* (MERA). MERA gave school districts significantly more state education aid, and dramatically increased state oversight to ensure that these additional resources were spent well. To provide this accountability, the landmark law called for creating state curriculum frameworks (i.e., content standards) and state tests, the MCAS exams, to evaluate how well schools and school districts performed relative to these new state standards. Most important, MERA also required students to pass a state exit exam to ensure that those graduating had “demonstrated mastery of a common core of skills.”⁹

While many educators experienced these changes as an enormous increase in state involvement in local education, in hindsight, it is notable that MERA left most responsibility for delivering student success in the hands of local decision makers, with one important caveat: The law shifted primary management responsibility for districts and schools from school committees to school superintendents and principals, most significantly, by explicitly assigning these professional administrators all responsibility for hiring school personnel. The law also expanded school authority by making principals administrative non-union workers, and requiring the establishment of School Councils to develop an annual strategic improvement plan for every school.¹⁰

Despite MERA’s intention to empower school leaders and local communities in the Commonwealth, the locus of control has shifted dramatically from schools and districts to the state and federal level. The shift began with the implementation of state curriculum frameworks, assessment, and accountability requirements, but it was accelerated by the school and district ratings required by the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), which significantly raised the stakes of state curriculum frameworks and assessments for local schools and districts.

Before 2001, the federal role was mostly limited to providing financial assistance to schools serving low-income students through Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA). At its core, this Civil Rights–era law sought to protect the interests of children who had struggled historically to gain equal access to public education. NCLB reflected a belief that simply providing additional dollars to high-poverty schools was insufficient. The 2001 federal law required states to develop standardized tests and rank schools against one another based on their performance and progress toward closing achievement gaps between student subgroups.¹¹

The federal government made another push to strengthen state authority in 2009 through a component of the Race to the Top program. The criteria for scoring proposals for this \$4.3 billion competitive grant program awarded points to states with existing or new legislation empowering state education agencies to intervene directly in persistently low-achieving schools. At a time of dramatic Great Recession-era budget cuts, this federal initiative created a powerful financial incentive for state control and induced a wave of state-level policy change.¹²

Massachusetts responded in 2010 with *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap*, which authorized the State Board of Education to take over chronically struggling schools and school districts. Simultaneously, this legislation strengthened the hands of local administrators, giving superintendents overseeing state-designated turnaround schools the ability to make changes, such as lengthening the school day and dismissing teachers outside of the collective bargaining process.

Educators have conflicting views about how the increasing weight of state and federal accountability has affected student learning. Higher standards and accountability have provided data that incontrovertibly document persistent opportunity and achievement gaps among student populations.¹³ These data have pressured the field to work aggressively to improve instructional practices and help students acquire the more advanced skills required by today’s knowledge-driven industries. Many attribute Massachusetts students’ leading performance on national assessments to the state being among the first to adopt rigorous standards and accountability. But others feel that these policy efforts unintentionally pressured teachers to raise test scores above all else, narrowed the curriculum to tested subjects, harmed students with disabilities and those whose native language is not English, increased the concentration of poor students in high-poverty schools, and made teaching in these schools less attractive.¹⁴

As education policymakers have worked to refine test-based accountability, a variety of forces are pushing educators to think about learning and development beyond the confines of the K–12 system. These include growing awareness of the importance of early learning, increased focus on social-emotional development, and recognition that far too many students who pass high school exit exams struggle to make successful transitions into post-secondary education and employment (see above sidebar).

The Supreme Judicial Court's Definition of Public Education

In the landmark McDuffy decision, which cleared the way for the *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993*, the SJC concluded that an educated child should possess the seven following capabilities: "(i) sufficient oral and written communication skills to enable students to function in a complex and rapidly changing civilization; (ii) sufficient knowledge of economic, social, and political systems to enable students to make informed choices; (iii) sufficient understanding of governmental processes to enable the student to understand the issues that affect his or her community, state, and nation; (iv) sufficient self-knowledge and knowledge of his or her mental and physical wellness; (v) sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage; (vi) sufficient training or preparation for advanced training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently; and (vii) sufficient level of academic or vocational skills to enable public school students to compete favorably with their counterparts in surrounding states, in academics or in the job market."

The SJC's expansive definition of a public education extends far beyond what the state currently measures. The contrast between the SJC's language and the relatively narrow scope of state-measured outcomes frames the challenge facing those who would strengthen education accountability policy and practice.

These concerns have led to community-based collaborative impact efforts. Like education accountability, this approach uses data to build political will to tackle social problems. To their credit, these cross-sector partnerships pool resources and align interventions, but they have been largely driven by nonprofit and philanthropic leaders without state or local government affiliation. The approach has been criticized as too top-down, and many attribute the failure of a large number of these projects to their leaders' inability to build greater buy-in due to their external position.¹⁵

In Massachusetts, the Working Cities Challenge illustrates the potential of this kind of data-driven cross-sector initiative. Through the Working Cities Challenge, leaders in Lawrence worked in close collaboration with the school district to engage parents and help increase family economic stability. While the project has yet to demonstrate long-term outcomes, a recent independent evaluation finds that it has been highly successful.¹⁶

For Massachusetts education leaders interested in using local accountability to break down the walls of their schools to provide students with multi-dimensional learning experiences and developmental supports, the Working Cities Challenge model offers valuable lessons.

The Core Purposes of Local Accountability

Thus far we have outlined the argument for local accountability mostly in relation to the limitations of state and federal accountability. However, the last thing public schools want is to solve these problems with another level of bureaucracy. And given what experience tells us about limited data literacy within most school systems and the public at large (see sidebar, p. 13), there are also serious questions about how communities build capacity to carry out this process. While addressing these concerns will require considerable creativity and energy, local accountability has three core purposes that make placing attention on improving the practice vital.

1. Local accountability aligns school improvement efforts with local values.

Determining how well schools are performing requires value judgments about what is desirable and most important in education. Because values are a product of local culture, as well as social and economic conditions that can vary widely even among neighboring communities, the taxpayers, businesses, and families in any given school district may have different perspectives on the student learning outcomes their community should strive to influence.

Some districts may see the development of strong early learning systems as a priority; others may want to invest in vocational education to help more students develop skills that can carry them directly into the workforce after high school. At a school level, parents and teachers may aim to help all students become bilingual. Other school communities may want all children to develop computer programming skills. State and federal accountability do not prevent communities

from doing any of these things, but overreliance on the state to measure school performance makes it very difficult to ensure that the educational experiences communities offer beyond the tested subjects are provided with quality. By delivering these experiences in a manner that is subject to true quality controls, a local accountability system puts educators in a better position to improve in areas that their communities value.

2. Local accountability places transparent and commonly understood strategic objectives at the unit of change: the school community.

One of the strongest lessons from the past two decades of education reform is that change and innovation happen at the school level. The widely cited 2001 annual report of the

Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission underscored this point, noting that “[t]he school is the most effective unit of change, as it has the most direct impact on student achievement. The move to create change at this level *must be systematic and must engage the entire school community* [emphasis added].”²²

In effect, this is a call for local accountability because experience tells us that for data-driven change to succeed, stakeholders must be able to trust the data and interpret it. To meet these conditions, it is critical that members of a school community (parents, teachers, and community stakeholders) have a strong role in the selection and development of new measures.²³

Building a Culture of Data for Continuous Improvement

In a recent report looking at how accountability has made educators more data-driven, the national Data Quality Campaign (DQC) outlines several growing pains. Foremost among them, they note, “data were used as a hammer instead of a flashlight.” While state and federal investment produced a wealth of data to comply with accountability laws, they were put to use for accountability purposes before teachers and schools had grown accustomed to these new data and developed an understanding of how to use them. They also point out that parents were rarely provided with tools to see their child’s learning trajectory and information to help them better support student progress, and educators were not provided the conditions, capacity, and support to use the data in ways that built a culture of continuous improvement.¹⁷

While the DQC report describes the experience nationally, MassINC has seen

affirmation that these findings are just as relevant in Massachusetts. In 2016, MassINC convened an ESSA learning community with Gateway City leaders who expressed remarkably consistent views about how data is used in schools and the shortcomings of NCLB in this regard.¹⁸

Educators at these forums were particularly concerned that the public lacked data literacy, which made it difficult for them to be empowered by the available data. Public opinion polling reinforces this view. In 2017, MassINC found that a majority of registered voters in Massachusetts believed they had insufficient information on how well public schools in their communities perform; most relied on their own perceptions or word of mouth to form opinions about school quality.¹⁹

Between 2015 and 2017, in partnership with BU and the Rennie Center, MassINC

supported efforts to evaluate college and career readiness efforts in Gateway Cities through researcher-practitioner partnerships. The lack of capacity in Gateway Cities for data-driven efforts to develop and continuously improve evidence-based programs was one of the key takeaways from this project.²⁰

Likewise, a recent evaluation of the Working Cities Challenge found that while these collaborative efforts were able to establish strong outcome measures for their projects, they struggled to generate and interpret data for continuous improvement.²¹

As leaders think about local accountability, they must recognize both the aversion to data-driven improvement created by state and federal accountability, and the limitations of data literacy and infrastructure in these communities.

3. As a process, local accountability can honor the integral role schools play in nurturing the civic health of their communities.

Public schools play a critical role in fostering personal relationships among adults and building their civic leadership skills. Schools also give children their first appreciable exposure to government institutions and democratic processes. It has been noted that school reform lacks “a vocabulary for how public education relates to place” (i.e., the communities in which schools operate), and, as a result, appreciation for the significance of the relationship between schools and civic health is underdeveloped.²⁴

Local accountability can help ensure that public schools have “an orientation of care and consciousness” toward community both in how they define and measure schools success, and through the processes of determining school priorities and working collaboratively to improve performance in these areas.²⁵ Moving in this direction would be a departure from

state and federal accountability approaches, which have rarely empowered struggling school communities to foster social capital and build civic capacity.

Guiding Principles for the Design of Local Accountability Systems

With the core purposes of local accountability in mind, we must now consider basic design principles. Below we expand on the extensive literature on designing state accountability systems by fleshing out questions unique to local accountability.²⁶ They include:

1. **Structure:** What kind of local accountability system will position the community to meet its objectives?
2. **Coherence:** How will school and district accountability policies complement and interact with the state’s accountability system?

States Are Using ESSA to Give Districts a Larger Role

In contrast with NCLB, ESSA provides a clear opening to increase accountability at the local level. First, ESSA is less proscriptive than NCLB, which established a mostly formulaic approach to school and district accountability. This flexibility gives states room to work with districts to develop innovative accountability models. Second, as noted previously, ESSA explicitly reaches beyond test-based accountability systems by requiring states to include broader measures of school quality and student success. Finally, ESSA places much of the authority and responsibility for school improvement on districts. Districts are to develop and implement comprehensive support and improvement plans, including those schools identified for targeted support.

States are beginning to use these flexibilities to engage local school districts

in the development of accountability indicators. California, for instance, began to decentralize accountability for public education, requiring communities to develop Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP) in 2013. Each district, county office of education, and charter school must submit an LCAP that describes the overall vision for students, annual goals, and specific actions that will be taken to achieve the vision and goals. The LCAP is developed and reviewed each year in coordination with the district’s annual budget cycle through a process that requires strong parent and community engagement. California has used the flexibility afforded by ESSA to further position LCAP development as the central component of accountability in the state.

In 2017, Texas passed a law establishing local accountability systems that

allow districts and charter schools to develop plans to conduct evaluations using locally developed indicators and combine these measures with three state-mandated indicators to assign overall A-F ratings for each school. Currently, 20 school districts are developing these accountability systems, which will go into effect for the 2018-2019 school year.

Other states are using ESSA to encourage more subtle forms of local accountability. In Vermont, for instance, districts will be able to select from a set of college and career readiness measures, including SAT scores, scores on AP tests, or the percentage of students earning industry-recognized certificates. Other states, including Hawaii and Oregon, plan to include local measures on school report cards.

3. Engagement and Communication: How will the school and district engage the community in both the development of the system and the response to the results?

Structure

Unlike a state accountability system, which has a relatively standard structure, local accountability systems can range in intensity. The most basic approach is a system built for goal setting based on strategic objectives. For example, a community may want to establish highly visible goals for recruiting and retaining teachers of color district-wide. At a school level, there may be areas of learning unique to a school's design that are important to elevate and document (e.g., an arts magnet may want assessments and goals for proficiency in instrumental music). By providing a formal framework for collaboratively developing indicators and carefully evaluating performance in these areas, a local accountability system can place additional focus on improvement across a broad set of learning outcomes.

At the other end of the spectrum, communities may want a full-blown local accountability system with a more well-rounded set of measures built on innovative assessments that can detect knowledge, skills, and dispositions that traditional standardized tests have difficulty capturing. Such an approach would

help address concerns that state accountability is narrowing the curriculum and provide a much more reliable indicator of school progress across multiple dimensions of learning. While more complex, systems that measure more indicators ensure that gains in one area are not at the expense of another. And, if the measures are combined correctly, a full-blown local accountability system will also have far less measurement error than a system that relies on only a handful of indicators, providing a stronger signal that school performance is trending in one direction or another.

Whether opting for a limited approach or a complete accountability system, communities should have a sound theory of action. Together, leaders must be able to clearly articulate to each other and to the public why they are developing the system and how the data will be used to achieve stated objectives. One theory of action is that local accountability processes will promote “social accountability” by empowering parents and community leaders through increased awareness of school and district goals and performance.²⁷ But simply generating information is not sufficient. To serve this “social” purpose, parents and community members must have an interest in accessing data and the ability to both interpret it and act on it.

Another theory of action is that local accountability will promote a deeper understanding of school progress, position-

Dimension	Key Question	Examples
External Coherence	Are connections <u>among multiple accountability systems</u> logically consistent?	The outcomes that are rewarded in the local system either support or extend (in a manner that does not inhibit) those in the state/federal system. Parent, family, and community partners experience and articulate a strong sense of engagement and alignment with local accountability policy and practice.
Internal Coherence	Are the components <u>within the local system</u> logically related to one another?	Valued performance on one indicator will not detract from performance on another indicator. Efforts are not duplicated and are aligned with pre-existing tools, methods, and priorities.
K-12 Coherence	As students advance from kindergarten to grade 12, are the <u>different levels</u> of the system logically connected?	Incentives for performance in each grade address key prerequisites for success in subsequent grades. The desired outcomes in elementary and middle school are selected to support success in high school and beyond.

IDEAS IN ACTION: Student-Centered Accountability

The Student-Centered Accountability Program (S-CAP) is a system of accountability designed by a group of Colorado rural school districts. At the heart of Student-Centered Accountability is a focus on the success of well-rounded students using a system for continuous improvement. To accomplish this, districts use multiple measures of student success to expand results beyond a single state test score. Classroom assessments, as well as dispositions that characterize a successful student, are used to provide more meaningful and comprehensive data to describe student achievement and growth. In addition to redefining student results, S-CAP maintains that evaluating the capacity of the systems that support student success is an essential function of accountability. S-CAP uses an on-site audit of districts to evaluate the system components needed to support student success. With both comprehensive student success data and ratings from on-site reviews, local school boards are able to monitor performance and ensure that the district continuously improves its capacity for cultivating student success.²⁹

Ultimately, S-CAP represents a group of small rural districts collaborating to create a more holistic and balanced system. The S-CAP system also incorporates on-site peer reviews to provide richer, more comprehensive feedback about performance. Through peer support and engagement with partners, S-CAP districts are strengthening capacity to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment.³⁰

IDEAS IN ACTION: Commitment to Communication

Metropolitan Atlanta's Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS), one of the nation's largest school districts, developed a district accountability system that stresses communication with the community: the Results Based Evaluation System (RBES). A component of the RBES requires every school to communicate their performance and vision to the community via an annual online report. These reports include a broad range of information that goes far beyond "traditional" accountability metrics, highlighting elements such as programmatic initiatives, strategic goals, and measures of school climate and student engagement. The practice underscores the value GCPS places on open communication and collaboration with the community.³⁵

ing educators to problem-solve. This purpose is particularly credible when schools and districts build their accountability systems on locally developed assessments that provide more actionable data than the end-of-year state summative assessments. Or when, by selecting an area for accountability, they commit resources and attention to working with researchers and experts to devise an evidence-based strategy, and collect reliable data to make more-informed decisions.

Theories of action are not mutually exclusive, and nothing prevents communities from integrating several. However, like the state and federal model, every local accountability effort should include promoting equity as a core theory of action (see sidebar, p. 17). To the extent that schools and districts can broaden outcome measures with local accountability, they can work to ensure that all students are thriving on all aspects of learning.

Coherence

Coherence refers to a system that is rationally connected. As summarized in the table on p. 15, at least three dimensions of coherence should be considered: external, internal, and K–12 coherence.

External coherence recognizes that while local accountability systems are necessarily distinct from federal and state initiatives, these systems can align in ways that are mutually beneficial. One way this is accomplished is by developing a local system that helps districts and schools to achieve the high-level outcomes called for by the state and federal system. For example, a district that wants to focus effort on closing subgroup gaps in the four-year graduation rate can develop a local accountability system that emphasizes benchmarks and indicators for the interventions it is putting in place to accomplish this goal.

Local accountability also provides a powerful opportunity to achieve external coherence with other educational systems in the community, such as efforts to ensure successful transitions to kindergarten by partnering with private early education providers, or programs to align high school and community college curriculums to reduce the need for remedial courses when students move on to these public educational institutions.

Internal coherence refers to design choices which help ensure that all the elements within a given school's accountability system are working together to support intended outcomes. Research tightly links a school's capacity to improve student

Increasing Equity by Building Local Capacity

Some question whether giving urban communities more power to determine local education priorities will increase equity. They raise the concern that families in these communities often lack information to make informed decisions (using as an example parents without college degrees who believe college is not for their children), and note the many historical examples of urban school districts ridden with political cronyism and outright public corruption.

Circumventing local control for these reasons is not an appropriate response. No matter how well-intentioned, such reasoning can be fraught with racial

and ethnic stereotypes. And more to the point, limiting the ability of underrepresented communities to act on their values will not advance equity. Experience suggests that the development of successful interventions in these contexts requires deep local engagement. Recognizing the power of community collaboration, the fields of urban planning and public health have long histories of leading participatory processes to empower and improve communities.³³

These efforts have taken many forms, but in general, they seek to increase self-determination by building commu-

nity capacity to identify problems and “ask why,” nurture local leaders and develop their self-confidence to act in the interest of their communities, build empowered organizational structures and mechanisms to resolve local conflicts, and create more equitable relationships with external partners.³⁴

Using local accountability as an opening to engage communities and build their capacity in these ways could provide both educational benefits to students and broader social and economic gains for neighborhoods and cities that have long suffered from disconnection and marginalization.

learning over time to organizational processes that connect and align work across the organization. In part, these processes work by boosting collective efficacy, or teachers’ beliefs about their faculty’s joint ability to advance student learning.²⁸ To create this culture, communities can use local accountability to empower educators to develop aligned assessments and goals, as in the Student-Centered Accountability Program (S-CAP) in Colorado (see sidebar, on p. 16).

Finally, K–12 coherence refers to efforts to align the system at each level, from kindergarten to graduation and beyond. Decisions about allocation of resources and instructional priorities should be positioned to support success across grades, programs, and schools. K–12 coherence has a cumulative beneficial impact on students as they progress. For example, in a system that values STEM outcomes in high school, strong mathematics, science, and technology programs at the elementary and middle-school levels ensure that students enter high school prepared to meet high expectations for technical performance.

Engagement and Communication

A major limitation of state and federal accountability is the difficulty it has in engaging the broader community in developing the system, and spurring action on the signals these systems

RESOURCES:

Moving to a More Robust Definition of Student Success

A growing body of resources is available to schools and districts seeking to develop broader measures of student success. The MyWays Student Success Framework, offered by Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC), is one example. Informed by cross-disciplinary research and developed collaboratively with experienced educators, MyWays covers 20 competencies to strive for in learning, work, and life. NGLC also offers a free online MyWays toolkit that walks schools through the process of defining success for graduates, and helps them map their work to these goals.⁵³ Another valuable resource is Transcend Education’s Graduate Aims, a database consisting of research-based summaries of expanded learning-outcome programs. Graduate Aims sorts outcomes into four interrelated categories (academic and career knowledge, transferable skills, social emotional factors, and global competencies), and points educators to more than 30 existing frameworks for evaluating student progress in these domains.⁵⁴

send in a way that is beneficial to the larger community. Local accountability can be far stronger in this regard.

Research clearly shows high-performance levels in schools where teachers, union-building leaders, and management plan and problem-solve together with a model of shared governance that identifies strategic priorities for improvement. Local accountability can further such work in places that have established shared governance practices, and create an opening to foster labor-management collaboration in places that are not yet engaging in this approach.³¹

Similarly, research reveals a strong link between engaged parents and school success. Local accountability offers a unique opportunity to involve parents meaningfully in the school community. The potential benefits are particularly large in urban districts, where systemic solutions are needed and educators often lack insight into the native language, culture, and community context. However, engaging parents in the development of accountability systems is a complex proposition. Schools must find ways to revise a culture whereby parents are their “clients,” and bridge the power gaps that are often present between families and professional educators.³²

Communication is central to engagement. A major shortcoming of state accountability is the technical nature of accountability regulations and policy, which makes them generally inaccessible to the public. To be effective, education leaders must be able to clearly communicate not only the purpose, but also the content of the accountability plan and how everyone is responsible for achieving shared goals (see sidebar, p. 16). From video and websites to mobile phone apps, information technology opens up new possibilities to accomplish this difficult task at relatively low cost.

Finally, in terms of both engagement and communication, planners must keep in mind from the outset that accountability is not a single event that culminates performance reports. Rather, it is a cyclical process that involves reviewing the assumptions and conditions for reform and evaluating the extent to which the system is incentivizing the right actions and results (See sidebar, p. 9). By implementing an ongoing system of monitoring, evaluation, and improvement, local accountability systems can better fulfill their promise of helping local leaders, parents, and other stakeholders improve outcomes for students.

Examples of What Communities Can Track with a Local Accountability System

Every accountability system is built on a collection of indicators or measures. Below we offer some examples of what communities could track in their systems and how they would generate the necessary data. (See table on p. 20 for a sample of indicators and their sources.) However, as the aim of local accountability is to position communities to think creatively about what best meets their needs and aspirations, this information is intended merely to stimulate thoughtful consideration among those drawing up locally customized plans.

College and Career Readiness

State and federal accountability have been criticized for failing to include indicators that ensure students are ready for success beyond high school.³⁶

In 2016, the national Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) convened an Accountability Working Group to recommend measures for tracking college and career readiness. The blueprint issued by the group includes measures relating to co-curricular learning and leadership experiences, progress toward earning post-high school credentials, and, most notably, transitions beyond high school.³⁷

Building on the findings of a 2014 CCSSO Accountability Working Group, they also recommended improving assessments of readiness to evaluate the development of higher-order skills that are essential to success in life.³⁸ Critical thinking, problem-solving, communicating, working collaboratively, leadership, initiative, and adaptability are all deemed essential in today’s knowledge-driven economy. While schools can teach these skills and dispositions, current standardized tests have difficulty isolating their acquisition.³⁹

Performance tasks (i.e., assessments that ask students to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and proficiency by applying their skills in context) can assess the development of this full range of higher order skills. Advances in the design of performance assessments, including computer-based task simulations and automated scoring, facilitate increased use of performance assessments at the local level.⁴⁰

Weaving these alternative assessments into local accountability programs will require educators who are trained and supported to develop common rubrics and auditing processes for evaluating student work consistently. As previously men-

tioned, a number of Gateway City districts are already working to adopt this approach through the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Educational Assessment (MCIEA). Adopting a rigorous approach will give schools and school communities meaningful information about their progress in these areas.

Early and Out-of-School Learning

Although researchers have not reached a precise consensus, they broadly agree that a disproportionate share of human cognitive potential is established in the pre-K years. While interventions during this stage of rapid brain development have lasting impact on intelligence and behavior, current governance and accountability dis-incentivizes efforts to focus resources and attention on this stage of life. Local accountability measures could address this shortcoming by elevating a set of performance measures capable of detecting the benefits of early intervention.

Some meaningful data to inform outcome measures are readily available. For instance, the state has developed a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to monitor the quality of family and center-based providers, and many districts have developed reliable kindergarten-readiness assessments.⁴¹ Other critical indicators of early intervention are less well established. Data to measure efforts to deliver pre- and post-natal services to high-risk mothers are particularly lacking. Local accountability could provide an impetus to monitor the success of these early interventions, which would likely generate significant long-term benefits for public school districts.⁴²

Similarly, local accountability could provide an impetus to strengthen afterschool and other out-of-school learning programs operated by private providers. Efforts to improve the quality of out-of-school learning have waxed and waned with the availability of both public and private resources. But educators note that accountability has also played a role in the level of support for these programs. Increasing focus on standardized tests has reduced support for community organizations, some educators claim, or has at least shifted these groups' orientations from their traditional focus on promoting social-emotional development to providing academic support.

With greater awareness of the importance of social-emotional skills, communities are now beginning to partner with their out-of-school providers to ensure that youth have more direct access to enrichment activities, explicitly to nurture social

and emotional growth. Lawrence Public Schools has used extended learning time to weave enrichment opportunities offered by community-based organizations into the school day in order to make these experiences available to all students.⁴³

Boston After School & Beyond provides a powerful model for how communities can establish and track measurable goals for out-of-school programming, particularly in the social-emotional development domain and the attainment of "digital badges," which represent competency determinations aligned with the multi-state Next Generation Science Standards. While Boston has considerable resources to undertake this work, Gateway Cities integrating out-of-school learning into their local accountability systems can glean a lot from the framework that Boston has spent more than a decade creating and refining.⁴⁴

Health and Wellness

Public schools have a critical role to play in influencing the social determinants of health, which have profound implications for well-being over a lifetime.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, evidence suggests that accountability may have had a net negative health impact over the past two decades.

Since the late-19th century, physical education has been a central component of American public schools. The medical community has noted an alarming decline in the role of schools in promoting physical education, which has been partly associated with the rise of test-based accountability.⁴⁶ Less physical activity has contributed to rising rates of childhood obesity, which is strongly linked to both earnings and incidence of chronic illness in adulthood.⁴⁷ School districts looking to improve physical education have many reliable measures that local accountability can elevate, most notably the age-based standards developed by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE).

Diminished physical education is certainly not the only cause of the childhood obesity epidemic, and improving access to these school programs is not the only response. But solving the problem calls for the kinds of cross-sector efforts that schools are uniquely positioned to lead, with local accountability strategy as a guiding force. Successful childhood obesity prevention initiatives rely heavily on public schools as providers of health education, physical education, and nutrition. The nationally recognized program Shape Up Somerville exemplifies the power of systemic community-wide public health approaches to improve childhood health and well-being.⁴⁸

Sample of Local Accountability Indicators and Sources

CATEGORY/INDICATOR	DATA SOURCE/INSTRUMENT
College and Career Readiness	
Share of 9th grade cohort earning post-secondary credits while in high school	District SIS
Share of 9th grade cohort completing work-based learning experience while in high school	District SIS
Share of 9th grade cohort earning credential with labor market value	District SIS
Share of 9th grade cohort enrolling in post-secondary studies without remediation	DHE
Share of students entering the workforce directly earning more than \$600 weekly	DESE
Early and Out-of-School Learning	
Percent of high-risk mothers enrolled in home visiting prenatally	
Percent of family child care providers with Quality Rating and Improvement System Rating 3 or 4	EEC
Percent of children entering kindergarten ready to learn	Local assessment
Percent of students enrolled in high-quality summer program for at least 4 weeks	Local assessment
Health and Wellness	
Incidence of childhood obesity	Local assessment
Percent of students who report being the victim of bullying during past year	Climate survey
Percent of students who report being physically active for 60 minutes, 5+ days per week	Climate survey
Percent of students who attain Red Cross Level 5 swimming skills	American Red Cross
Percent of students meeting gender and age-group health-related physical fitness standard	NASPE
Community Engagement and Civic Health	
Percent of students who complete service learning project	Local assessment
Improvement on student voice index	Climate survey
Improvement on parent engagement index	Climate survey
Improvement on Civic Health Index	Community Survey
Educator Recruitment and Development	
Percent of teachers who identify as nonwhite	District
Percent of teachers retained	DESE
Percent of principals retained	DESE

As noted earlier, a key theory of action for local accountability is the ability to devise evidence-based strategy and data-driven action through the process. A growing body of literature suggests this approach is particularly effective when applied to public health challenges. Randomly controlled studies show that when researchers and community members in Gateway City-scale settings identify a local public health challenge and develop and test interventions collaboratively, they can make considerable progress.⁴⁹

Community Engagement and Civic Health

A 2017 report by the Education Commission of the States makes a powerful case for the role of accountability in ensuring that schools clearly identify and fulfill their civic missions, noting that schools must “cultivate students’ care and concern for their communities and equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate effectively in democratic life.”⁵⁰

Communities that want to position schools as generators of social and civic capital can use local accountability to elevate these objectives. Such measures would include indicators rang-

ing from student completion of high-quality service-learning projects to school climate surveys that capture a school's commitment to incorporating student voices into decision-making.

School climate surveys can also assess levels of parent engagement, not only as it relates to their children's education but also to their involvement in the broader school community, from participating on committees and volunteering in the schools to monitoring school performance data and acting politically on behalf of their communities.

Educator Recruitment and Development

A strong local accountability system could help districts recruit and retain talented teachers. Research shows that dissatisfaction with accountability policies is a major driver of teacher separations.⁵¹ Moreover, recruiting and developing talented teachers and principals is a vital community function. Leaders across the community should ensure that the district has a sound strategy, and contribute to its execution as appropriate.

Devising visible measures for educator recruitment and development in local accountability systems is one way to ensure that community leaders jointly undertake this shared responsibility. These measures could range from educator responses to school climate surveys to progress made toward a more diverse educator workforce. Measures could also come from local strategic plans, such as the yield of a “grow your own” teacher pathway initiative, which structures a student and paraprofessional pipeline for local teaching careers.⁵²

Furthering Our Sense of What is Possible

Experience with state and federal accountability over the past two decades shows that measuring student outcomes has had profound impact on public education, both positive and negative. We have learned a tremendous amount about the strengths and weaknesses of state and federal accountability systems. While the potential of local accountability to respond to the challenges that remain has not been rigorously tested, many strands of evidence suggest that it is a particularly good time to pursue this line of inquiry and innovation. As policymakers think about the function of accountability in education reform moving forward, it is critical that they consider strategies to strengthen the role of local leaders, in schools and out.

The next two papers in this MassINC series will demonstrate that district and community capacity to develop and govern local accountability systems, with a few exceptions, is very weak—particularly in Gateway Cities. While some might think the status-quo reflects real-world realities destined to make local accountability futile, we believe the current situation simply illuminates conditions that leaders in Massachusetts—at every level—must resolve to address.

A conversation about governance structures and other processes necessary to make local accountability a success ultimately reverts back to how you define local accountability. Our goal with this paper has been to sketch out the rough contours of what has been a rather amorphous concept. We encourage readers to approach this first attempt as a work in progress, and to join in the discussion. What is your vision for local accountability? How would you describe your theory of action and the principles that should guide design of an effective local accountability system?

While we always encourage readers to contact us with ideas, our hope is that these conversations will occur foremost within communities, particularly among school committee members and those who sit on nonprofit boards and lead cross-sector collaboratives. As noted at the outset, Gateway Cities are already innovating in this area and demonstrating what is possible. Their activity is laying firm groundwork upon which together we must continue to build.

Notes

- 1 Benjamin Forman and Andrew Bundy. “Next Generation Education Accountability: Design Ideas from New England’s Small-to-Midsized Urban School Districts” (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2016).
- 2 For a recent review, see Collin Hitt and others. “Do Impacts on Test Scores Even Matter? Lessons from Long-Run Outcomes in School Choice Research” (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2018).
- 3 Forman and Bundy (2016).
- 4 For more on the “fifth indicator” see Scott Marion and Susan Lyons. “In Search of Unicorns: Conceptualizing and Validating the ‘Fifth Indicator’ in ESSA Accountability Systems” (Dover, NH: National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, 2016).
- 5 For instance, ESSA only allows for indicators that are reliable, valid, and comparable for all students. It also limits how much weight the fifth measure could assume in the formula states devise to calculate overall school performance.
- 6 John Portz. “‘Next-Generation’ Accountability? Evidence from Three School Districts” *Urban Education* (2017).
- 7 See *The Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning Systems* (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2013).
- 8 The Working Cities Challenge is a competition led by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB). Cities submit proposals for multi-year projects that will solve problems through collaborative leadership and systems change. The inaugural round of the Boston Fed’s Working Cities Challenge was held in 2013. Six cities—Lawrence, Fitchburg, Chelsea, Holyoke, Salem, and Somerville—were awarded a combined \$1.8 million in grant awards. In a second round held in 2015, five Massachusetts cities (Haverhill, Lowell, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester) were each awarded \$475,000. The FRBB has expanded the competition to cities in Connecticut and Rhode Island.
- 9 The 1993 act says “the ‘competency determination’ shall be based on the academic standards and curriculum frameworks for tenth graders in the areas of mathematics, science and technology, history and social science, foreign languages, and English, and shall represent a determination that a particular student has demonstrated mastery of a common core of skills, competencies and knowledge in these areas, as measured by the assessment instruments described in section one I. Satisfaction of the requirements of the competency determination shall be a condition for high school graduation.” Regulations adopted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (603 CMR 30) simply require students to score proficient on the math and English MCAS and on one science or engineering discipline.
- 10 Co-chaired by the principal, this body includes parents of a current student elected by parents, teachers selected by teachers, other community representatives, and, in high schools, at least one student. MERA charged School Councils with assisting in identification of the educational needs of students attending the school, reviewing the school budget, and formulating a school improvement plan. See General Laws Chapter 71, Section 59C.
- 11 It is worth noting that in the decade between the enactment of MERA and the implementation of NCLB accountability requirements, Massachusetts did proactively develop a variant of what might be considered local accountability practices. Administered through the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), Massachusetts established standards for districts and schools, complete with rubrics, models, tools, and other resources. Unfortunately, much of the effort devoted to fostering local accountability in the first decade of MERA was overwhelmed by the demands of NCLB.
- 12 William Howell. “Results of President Obama’s Race to the Top” *Education Next* 15.4 (2015).
- 13 See <https://number1forsome.org>
- 14 For example, see: Margaret Crocco and Arthur Costigan. “The Narrowing of Curriculum and Pedagogy in the Age of Accountability: Urban Educators Speak Out.” *Urban Education* 42.6 (2007); Linda Darling-Hammond. “Race, Inequality, and Educational Accountability: The Irony of No Child Left Behind.” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 10 (3); and Alexander Bogin and Phuong Nguyen-Hoang. “Property Left Behind: An Unintended Consequence of a No Child Left Behind ‘Failing’ School Designation.” *Journal of Regional Science* 54.5 (2014).
- 15 For example, see “When Collective Impact Has an Impact” (Denver, CO: Spark Policy Institute, 2018).
- 16 “Massachusetts Working Cities Challenge: Final Assessment of Round 1 Progress” (Boston, MA: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, July 2018).
- 17 *From Hammer to Flashlight: A Decade of Data in Education* (Washington, DC: Data Quality Campaign, 2017).
- 18 Forman and Bundy (2016).
- 19 Steve Koczela and others. “The Public’s Take on Education Accountability: Results from a Survey of Massachusetts Voters” (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2017).
- 20 Ben Forman. “Improving College & Career Outcomes through Research-Practice Partnerships: A Case Study of ILP Implementation in Three Gateway City School Districts” (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2017).
- 21 “Massachusetts Working Cities Challenge: Final Assessment of Round 1 Progress” (Boston, MA: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, July 2018).
- 22 See Maxine Minkoff and others. *Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission Annual Report* (2001).
- 23 For example, see Amy Edmondson. *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* (San Francisco, CA: JosseyBass, 2012).
- 24 David Gruenewald. “Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education” *American Educational Research Journal* 40.3 (2003).
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 This is not intended to address the full set of considerations associated with developing education accountability systems, which has been the focus of other publications (e.g., see Marianne Perie and others. *Key Elements for Educational Accountability Models*. (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007). Rather, the intent is to describe the core principles that distinguish strong initiatives at the local level from those designed solely for state or federal purposes.
- 27 Social accountability is a term derived from international economic development. It refers to strategies to improve government performance by increasing both citizen engagement and the responsiveness of public institutions to citizen input. Social accountability is distinct from political accountability, where citizen voice in education has indirect influence

- through elected representatives. See Johnathan Fox. “Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?” *World Development* 72 (2015).
- 28 Richard Elmore and others. “The Internal Coherence Assessment Protocol & Developmental Framework: Building the Organizational Capacity for Instructional Improvement in Schools. Research Paper.” *Strategic Education Research Partnership* (2014).
 - 29 See <https://scapbvschools.weebly.com/>
 - 30 See <https://www.coloradoedinitiative.org/grass-roots-approach-rethinking-accountability/>
 - 31 Saul Rubinstein. “Strengthening Partnerships: How Communication and Collaboration Contribute to School Improvement” *American Educator* 37.4 (2014).
 - 32 See Ann Ishimaru. “Rewriting the Rules of Engagement: Elaborating a Model of District–Community Collaboration.” *Harvard Educational Review* 84.2 (2014); Amanda Stefanski and others. “Beyond Involvement and Engagement: The Role of the Family in School–Community Partnerships.” *School Community Journal* 26.2 (2016).
 - 33 Glenn Laverack and Ronald Labonte. “A Planning Framework for Community Empowerment Goals within Health Promotion.” *Health Policy and Planning* 15.3 (2000).
 - 34 Diana Mitlin and John Thompson. “Participatory Approaches in Urban Areas: Strengthening Civil Society or Reinforcing the Status Quo?” *Environment and Urbanization* 7.1 (1995).
 - 35 See <http://publish.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps/home/public/schools-accountability>
 - 36 For example, see “Opportunities and Options: Making Career Preparation Work for Students” (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014).
 - 37 See Council of Chief State School Officers. *Destination Known: Valuing College AND Career Readiness in State Accountability Systems* (Washington, DC, 2017).
 - 38 See Council of Chief State School Officers. *Recommendations from the CCSSO Accountability Advisory Committee: A Vision for Improved Education Accountability Systems* (Washington, DC, 2014). See also Linda Darling-Hammond and others. “Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 22 (2014).
 - 39 Chris Gabrieli and others. “Ready To Be Counted: The Research Case for Education Policy Action on Non-Cognitive Skills” (Boston, MA: Transforming Education, 2015).
 - 40 Suzanne Lane. *Performance Assessment: The State of the Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity in Education, 2010).
 - 41 For instance, Somerville has developed the Kindergarten Entry Skills Inventory, which captures multiple domains (early literacy, early math, motor skills, and social-emotional learning). Somerville also collects Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) data to measure classroom quality and teacher-child interactions, which inform coaching delivered in both public and private early learning settings.
 - 42 For example, see Susanna Loeb. “Accountability for Early Education—A Different Approach and Some Positive Signs” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, August 2018).
 - 43 Ben Forman and Amy Dain. “Leading Together: Four Case Studies of Successful Gateway City Initiatives” (Boston, MA: MassINC, 2015).
 - 44 More than 200 after-school and summer programs serving close to 20,000 opt in to this network as part of a deliberate strategy to augment city and district efforts. Boston Beyond’s Achieve, Connect, Thrive social-emotional skills framework includes nine skills and dispositions that are predictive of school, college, and career readiness and that can be taught, learned, measured, and improved in a variety of settings. School and youth development leaders provided substantial input to ensure that the framework could be applied practically, and RAND ensured that the framework drew on the latest research from a variety of fields. Boston Beyond and BPS use related program- and student-level data to illuminate how specific program practices and instructional approaches lead to skill development.
 - 45 Michael Marmot. “Social Determinants of Health Inequalities.” *The Lancet* 365.9464 (2005).
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 - 48 Virginia Chomitz and others. *Shape Up Somerville: Building and Sustaining a Healthy Community, Reflections over 15 years* (1998–2013). (Somerville, MA: Shape Up Somerville, 2013); Christina Economos. “Shape Up Somerville Two-Year Results: A Community-Based Environmental Change Intervention Sustains Weight Reduction in Children” *Preventive Medicine* 57.4 (2013).
 - 49 David Hawkins and others. “Testing Communities That Care: The Rationale, Design, and Behavioral Baseline Equivalence of the Community Youth Development Study” *Prevention Science* 9.3 (2008); Lawrence Palinkas and others. *Research-Practice-Policy Partnerships for Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices in Child Welfare and Child Mental Health* (New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation, 2015).
 - 50 Paul Baumann and Jan Brennan. “State Civic Education Policy: Framework and Gap Analysis Tool” (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 2017).
 - 51 Anne Podolsky and others. “Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators” (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2016).
 - 52 See Dan Brown. “The Grow-Your-Own Game Plan” *Educational Leadership* 75.8 (May 2018).
 - 53 See: <http://myways.nextgenlearning.org>.
 - 54 Defining Graduate Aims: A Collection of Research and Resources for Design Teams (Transcend Education, 2017).

Part II:

School and District Improvement Plans

A Review of Local Accountability
Practice in Massachusetts
Gateway Cities

Part Two in a Series of Three Papers

Benjamin Forman
and Connor Lentz

Introduction

The first paper in this series described how state and federal education agencies have stepped up and assumed a stronger role in holding local schools and school districts accountable for improving student achievement. We argued that to make further progress, Massachusetts must now focus attention on the role of local communities in education accountability, and presented policies to position schools and districts to lead collaborative, community-driven processes that set educational goals consistent with their unique values and priorities.

In this paper, we examine Gateway City school and district improvement plans, which are regularly produced for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as required by state and federal accountability statutes (see sidebar p. 6). Despite their genesis with higher levels of government, these plans actually tell us a lot about the current condition of local accountability practice.

Foremost, school and district plans document the extent to which communities complement and build upon state and federal performance measures with their own measures of student achievement. They also provide an important window into local leadership and governance. In contrast to state and federal accountability—where the power to produce change derives from formal sanctions for underperformance that can be as serious as state takeovers—local accountability generally relies on more informal mechanisms to create urgency for change. The practice is particularly influential when it provides more transparency, understanding, and coherence about priorities and resource allocation, and whether strategic objectives have been met.¹

The pages that follow assess a selection of Gateway City school and district improvement plans. We analyze the performance measures in these documents, and contrast them with those embedded in superintendent evaluations. Our evaluation focuses on what is being measured and the degree to which each plan creates transparency and accountability for produc-

ing results. This analysis is followed by a discussion of what academic research suggests about our findings and how we might act on them to strengthen local accountability practice in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts' Gateway City school districts face particular pressure from state and federal accountability, for they educate an outside share of the historically underrepresented students that state and federal accountability laws aim to protect. While distinct in this regard, these urban communities still have much in common with their peers and it is likely that the strategic planning challenges revealed in this paper are also present in many other Massachusetts districts. It is our hope that this analysis will be informative for a wide swath of educators and education policy leaders in Massachusetts and beyond.

Findings

1. Most strategic plans for Gateway City schools and school districts do not include measurable goals for increasing student learning.

Every Gateway City school and school district has an improvement plan (see sidebar, p. 6). State law requires the submission of such plans annually for schools, and every three years for school districts. According to guidance from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), these plans should include “SMART goals” that clearly define the measurable outcomes they seek to achieve (see sidebar, p. 26).² In the Gateway City plans we reviewed, these outcome measures were either conspicuously absent or presented in ways that severely constrained their power to provide local accountability by not making goals and progress toward them clear and transparent (see sidebar, p. 28).

More than a third of the Gateway Cities in our sample (6 out of 16) produced district plans that did not include any outcome measures.³ In many cases, these districts prepared documents that were otherwise very organized and strategic,

making omission of measures that provide accountability for delivering results particularly notable. Three districts—Attleboro, Brockton, and Westfield—actually used an improvement plan template provided by DESE, but they removed the section on outcomes from the document.

Among the 10 district plans that did include outcomes, we found three problems. The most frequent was that most measures simply did not meet the definition of a SMART goal. Combined, the plans from these 10 districts included 165 items described as outcomes or goals; however, only about one-third of these measures were actually SMART. For example, Chelsea’s strategic plan includes two outcome measures labelled “SMART Goals,” but the district did not establish baselines or growth targets for them. Without this information, there is no way to ascertain how much progress the district aims to achieve within a predetermined time frame. From the local accountability perspective, this clouds transparency while significantly lessening the value of the goals embedded in Chelsea’s plan.⁴

A second problem for transparency was the extremely technical nature of many outcomes measures. For instance, one of Chicopee’s goals is worded:

Based on a 6 year target, Chicopee Public Schools will reach Math CPI goal of 85.4% (2016 80.3) for all students (grades 3-8, 10). At least 2.1% gain in CPI for remaining years to reach state determined goal.

While guidance from DESE specifically discourages this practice—stating “it is imperative that [outcomes] are framed in a way that helps make them meaningful to and easily understood by the public—in almost every instance of difficult-to-interpret goals, the district had simply incorporated a complex accountability measure developed by the state.

Though less common, a final issue was the inclusion of too many measures without assigning priority among them. New Bedford’s plan includes 60 “student learning” and “teacher practice” goals. Establishing so many un-tiered goals is likely to weaken accountability for targeted results. Even with less than half this number, Fall River’s list of outcome measures (24) is difficult to digest.

The Gateway City school improvement plans in our sample were more likely to contain outcomes (15 of 16), but the same shortcomings limited their value for accountability purposes. These 15 school improvement plans included 169 items described as outcomes or goals, but again, our review found that only about one-third of these measures actually met SMART goal criteria.

If we look at our sample of schools and districts and ask what percentage of their plans include *measurable* outcome goals tied directly to the accomplishments of students, the answer is disappointing. Two-thirds of district and half of school plans do not contain measurable goals with respect to actual student outcomes (Figure 1).

What Makes a Goal SMART?

“SMART” (affixed to “goal”) is an acronym commonly used in the world of strategic planning, but with slightly varying terms. The initials S and M generally refer to specific and measurable. The latter three letters often connote achievable, relevant, and time-bound. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, like many other states, sets forth the acronym’s terms as Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked.

Since some of the terms in the Commonwealth’s definition are somewhat subjective, we focus on the acronym’s Measureable and Timed and Tracked features to determine whether specific targets are indeed SMART. For instance, a stand-alone goal such as “utilize core instructional program to drive small group instruction” is clearly not measurable as constructed and therefore fails to meet the SMART standard. Likewise, an outcome measure such as “10% increase in students scoring advanced in ELA” that does not specify the timeframe for achieving the result, also fails to meet SMART goal objectives. Appendix A includes a full compendium of the goals we analyzed and whether we classified them as SMART.

2. Few Gateway City improvement plans create local accountability for areas of student learning that are not a part of the state’s accountability formula.

The plans we reviewed demonstrated that Gateway Cities are not exercising local control to create more well-rounded learning experiences for their students. To the contrary, school and district plans document the extent to which state and federal accountability has become the organizing focus of Gateway City schools (Figure 2). The descriptive language in the outcome section of Lynn’s district plan is telling. As if the community had no authority to set its own strategic priorities, they write: “Our major goals have been established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Waiver Plan.”

Only four Gateway City districts included measureable student learning goals that were not already present in the state’s accountability formula at the time the plans were crafted.⁵ And these measures had little relation to college and career readiness (CCR), the most glaring weakness in the state’s accountability formula. Chicopee did include a well-crafted goal to increase the percentage of high school graduates who have completed MassCore to 50 percent.⁶ But this was an extreme outlier. A few districts included CCR goals, but unlike Chicopee, they did not establish a target. For instance, Salem and Springfield both call for increasing the share of students with Advanced Placement qualifying scores, but neither district recorded a baseline or target for this measure.

The absence of CCR goals was particularly troublesome in the school improvement plans. High schools comprised 7 of the 16 schools in our sample. Haverhill High was the only school to mention student success in post-secondary education. But not only did the plan fail to include a target, the language calling for “greater participation in post-secondary admissions to higher education” was rather confusing. Many of the school improvement plans focused overwhelmingly on goals relating to instructional practices rather than to actual student outcomes.

3. A majority of Gateway City superintendents are not evaluated on objective measures of student learning.

Regulations established by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education guide the development of annual superintendent evaluations. These regulations specifically call for superintendents to set SMART goals for them-

Figure 1:
Share of Gateway City District and School Improvement Plans with Measurable Student Learning Goals

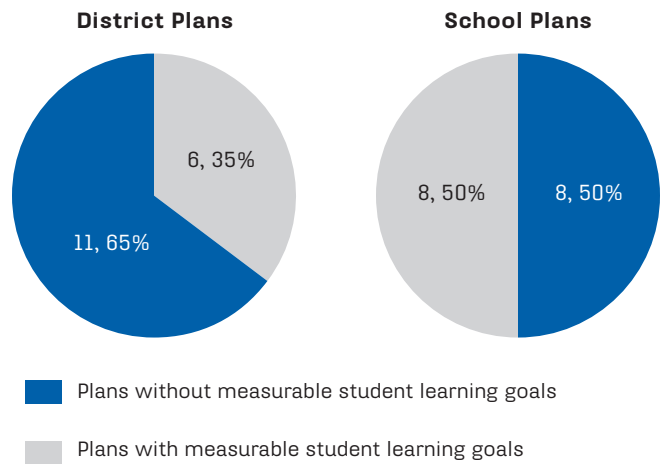
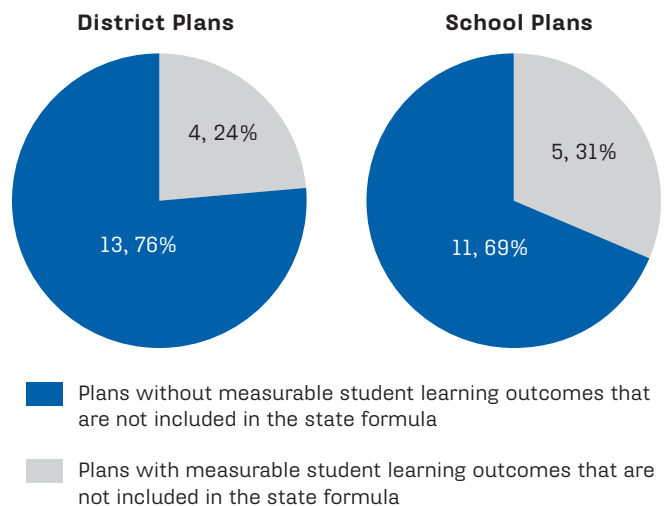


Figure 2:
Share of Gateway City District and School Improvement Plans with Measurable Student Learning Outcomes that are Not Included in the State Accountability Formula



selves related to student learning; school committees must consider progress on these SMART goals in their evaluation of superintendent performance.⁷

Our sample includes the goals set by 13 Gateway City superintendents. A majority (7 of 13) of these superintendents did not establish any SMART goals for themselves.

Lack of measurable goals clearly makes it difficult for school committee members to evaluate superintendent performance objectively. Our review of superintendent evaluations shows that school committees frequently submit reports with widely varying appraisals among individual members as to whether a superintendent has achieved his or her goals.⁸

However, goals established by a handful of superintendents do provide models for how Gateway Cities can prioritize student learning outcomes in areas that extend beyond state and federal accountability. For instance, Salem's superintendent set a discrete number of SMART goals, some drawn from state accountability and others established locally through a strategic planning process (see sidebar, p. 31). Chicopee's exemplary measure to increase MassCore completion was included in the superintendent's self-determined goals. While school committee members still assigned varying ratings to the superintendent for performance on this objective measure, at least the process of establishing the measure led to greater transparency and accountability for results on a student learning measure not included in the state ranking formula.

DESE's District Reviews Consistently Reveal Shortcomings in Improvement Plans

DESE conducts comprehensive district reviews, generally focusing on lower performing districts. The agency uses these reports to establish priorities for allocating its resources. Findings contained in these reports, which are publically available on DESE's website, are directly in line with our analysis of the Gateway City improvement plans.⁹

The DESE team visiting Haverhill put it most bluntly: "The district does not have a current, comprehensive, actionable District Improvement Plan." Other district reviews find an assortment of less glaring problems. For instance, the 2016 Fall River report says that while the district and schools have plans, the district "has not designated staff with primary responsibilities for planning and implementing priorities." The 2014 Brockton report notes that the "link between district goals and budget development was unclear to the review team. District budget documents do not provide comprehensive, transparent information about how resources were allocated to support district goals."

DESE reviewers also find that districts with seemingly strong plans, such as Malden, often fail to implement them. A 2017 report on Malden detailed a host of troubles:

- "The 2015 DIP is not driving planning or decision-making at the district level."
- "School committee members had little knowledge of the plan and most members did not report a focus on improving student achievement."
- "Central office administrators, directors, and principals reported that little attention has been paid to the 2015 DIP."
- "The DIP does not appear on the district's website; instead, the 'District Strategy,' dated 2011-2012, is currently on the website."

A 2017 review of the Pittsfield Public Schools that was generally very positive also raised concerns with the district plan. In a high-level finding, the review team writes: "The district's District Im-

provement Plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) do not have measurable goals and are missing some important components." Interestingly, they go on to note that the district's previous planning process had produced a DIP that was 140 pages long. Now Pittsfield wanted a shorter plan that was "a more realistic, meaningful, living document understandable to educators, parents, and community members."

The most hopeful review is also the most recent, and it contrasts sharply with our analysis of Springfield's district plan, which found no measurable goals. DESE's 2018 report on Springfield glowingly describes the district's efforts to leverage data for improvement: "The use of data is pervasive in the district. The district has well-organized systems to collect, disseminate, analyze, and use multiple sets of quantitative data to guide improvement, monitor progress in a timely way, and inform all aspects of decision-making related to teaching and learning."

Discussion

Academic research on local accountability is extremely limited. Most scholars approach the topic tangentially—that is, indirectly through primary analysis of another research topic. While there has been a recent uptick in studies on the efficacy of strategic planning in education, even this body of literature is thin in relation to local accountability practice—which is surprising given that most US public schools are required by law to engage in school- and district-level improvement planning on a regular basis. Nonetheless, some studies shed light on the tight relationship between effective improvement planning and robust local accountability practices.

Volumes of management research says strategic planning helps leaders establish priorities and goals, develop intentional strategies, and gain buy-in from staff and other key stakeholders.¹⁰ Strategic plans provide an impetus to innovate or, put another way, to help prevent organizational stagnation. Strategic planning can also alter power dynamics within an organization, a process that could be crucial in Gateway Cities looking to invent new ways of serving students and families in the 21st century.¹¹ These findings suggest that strategic planning could provide value to public education, particularly in urban schools where leaders confront serious daily challenges and find it difficult to organize new initiatives with long-term focus.

Studies showing that strategic planning may not be an effective use of time and resources in education are equally plentiful, however. School plans may simply codify practices that are already common rather than pushing educators to pursue new, unknown practices. Tenured faculty have strong job protections, so those who do not buy into the plan may not strive to see it succeed. And in urban districts, high turnover of superintendents and principals is often a major impediment to implementing strategic plans.

Only a few studies have explored the connection between strategic improvement planning and student achievement. Using data from a large number of schools in Nevada, the most rigorous study to date found that students in schools with higher-quality plans had better test scores, controlling for a variety of other factors. (More specifically, the Nevada schools that established goals with clearly delineated time frames and frequently monitored their progress tended to have the most student test-score improvement).¹²

But the literature suggests that such plans are rare. Numerous studies, including several in Massachusetts, show that educators view improvement planning as a routine exercise in compliance.¹³ Reviews have found that school plans often lack detail and are overly optimistic about results. At the other extreme, many plans include a prodigious number of strategic initiatives, overwhelming teachers.

From the perspective of local accountability, the most interesting study we reviewed was a recent Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral dissertation by Bob Ettinger, who partnered with the Cambridge Public Schools. After a year in residency experimenting with teams of Cambridge educators to improve strategic planning processes, he concluded that these efforts can only be productive when they are employed in an environment where local accountability is strong.¹⁴

Ettinger notes that leading scholars of accountability have found that increasing external accountability (i.e., state and federal sanctions) can make schools more dysfunctional if they do not have well-developed internal accountability structures (i.e., high levels of agreement on norms, values, and expectations). Conversely, increasing external accountability in schools with high internal accountability can produce positive results, giving them additional drive and focus.¹⁵

Policy Recommendations

School and district improvement plans are a window into local accountability practice. As detailed above, current Gateway City plans lack measurable student learning goals and fail to build upon the limited set of measures established by state and federal accountability. This is a strong indication that local accountability is underdeveloped, which should come as no surprise: Gateway City educators have been under intense state and federal accountability pressure. For many local educators, this oversight is a disincentive to formally commit to achieving results in areas that are not components of the state and federal formula. Our findings should serve as a wake-up call. State policymakers must work to position communities to exercise more robust accountability locally. Toward this end, we conclude with three ideas for consideration:

1. Incentivize high-quality school and district improvement planning.

To build greater levels of internal accountability within schools and districts, Massachusetts needs to structure incentives in ways that challenge local educators to establish transparent, realistic, and measurable goals. Ettinger advances this argument by quoting Jim Liebman, former chief accountability officer for the New York City Department of Education: “If we want the lever of accountability to be as powerful as possible, we have to provide ways for schools to build their capacity to be relatively self-sufficient in evaluating themselves every day.”

State incentives to improve planning practices could come in the form of direct rewards. For instance, schools and districts that submit strong improvement plans might receive relief from other reporting requirements. The state could also offer bonus points in its accountability formula for schools and districts that take on extra responsibility for improving student outcomes.

Alternatively, the state could incentivize stronger improvement planning by focusing greater attention on these documents. For example, the state could require public hearings on school and district improvement plans to raise more awareness of them. Or the state could simply work to make the documents more accessible. (We were unable to retrieve one-third of the

district plans on the districts’ public websites. Annual school improvement plans were even more difficult to locate online, especially the most current versions of the document). While DESE maintains an accountability webpage for every school in Massachusetts, these plans are not included. Posting current school and district improvement plans on this site, thereby making this information more readily accessible to the public, is a relatively simple way to heighten accountability.

To establish trust with schools and districts, the state should proceed with caution before creating new mandates in this area. However, to create local accountability and shared responsibility for school improvement, the community must be aware of strategic priorities and progress toward meeting them. Where appropriate, the state should facilitate efforts to increase access to this information.

2. Invest in new models to help communities enhance school and district improvement planning practices.

Even with strong incentives in place, Gateway Cities that serve high-need student populations will have difficulty carving out time and resources to plan for change. The state must develop a variety of models to provide support, striking a careful balance between under-resourcing efforts to provide technical assistance and over-mediating plan development.

School and District Improvement Plans in State and Federal Law

The requirement that all school principals work in consultation with school site councils to develop annual School Improvement Plans was a cornerstone of Massachusetts’ 1993 education reform act.²¹ Legislation requiring school districts to produce District Improvement Plans on three-year cycles came a decade later in a bill whose primary purpose was the reduction of municipal reporting. DIPs were a vehicle to consolidate all planning requirements established by previous state and federal laws.

Since their initial passage, these two

planning requirements have been revised repeatedly, changing the role of school committees in reviewing and approving school improvement plans, codifying the relationships between school site councils and other parent advisory groups, and requiring schools that serve high percentages of English Language Learners to include provisions for improving learning outcomes for those students.²²

At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required all schools designated in need of improvement to develop plans. The 2015 Every Stu-

dent Succeeds Act (ESSA), NCLB’s successor, calls on the lowest 5 percent of schools, schools with consistently underperforming subgroups, and high schools with chronically low graduation rates to work with their districts to submit an improvement plan to the state.

Under ESSA, schools and districts must show that the strategies proposed in their plans are evidence-based. States are instructed to prioritize improvement grants for schools and districts whose plans demonstrate a strong commitment to improving student outcomes.

Experience shows that a planning process driven too heavily by state-funded consultants is apt to result in a “pretty” document that schools and communities do not own and will not faithfully implement.

One model focuses on training principals to lead more dynamic planning efforts, helping them bring educators and community partners together to develop concise plans, monitor progress over shorter time horizons, and regularly re-evaluate their strategies. School improvement fashioned in this manner can enhance school culture by strengthening collaboration between teachers, administrators, and community leaders. Boston has gained considerable experience deploying this model in what it calls school-based inquiry teams. State policymakers should tap learnings from Boston and elsewhere to design models that could work in districts that lack resources and capacity to provide schools leaders with this level of coaching and support.

Another promising approach is to network schools so that they can collaboratively identify objectives, and test and refine strategies to meet shared goals. A recent meta-analysis found that this model increases use of data, shared decision-making, and the “efficacy of school systems.”

3. Use additional Chapter 70 funds to support innovation.

Reluctance to commit to measureable improvements in student learning beyond that required by state and federal accountability policy may at least partially be the result of resource limitations; if leaders believe resources are insufficient to get all students to basic proficiency targets, they may well see it as imprudent to push their systems to go beyond already established core academic learning thresholds.

Schools and districts that want to go deeper may simply lack the time and money to plan for the technically difficult change required to bring about these outcomes. The state often provides grants for innovation in the public education sector, but the timing of these funds has been unpredictable and often misaligned with the school calendar. Many schools and districts have invested time and energy developing programs only to see their grant funding eliminated through 9C cuts. And too often the allotted funds are insufficient to craft high-quality interventions in the first place.

Emerging Gateway City Models: The Salem Public Schools

In 2016, the Salem Public Schools—working with New Profit, a venture philanthropy that specializes in leading innovation in public education—raised funds privately to facilitate an intensive strategic planning process. Seventy staff participated in half a dozen work teams. They conducted focus groups and a survey to get additional input from teachers. They also held three City-wide Conversations, including one led in Spanish, and solicited responses to a community-wide survey. All of this effort led to a 49-page plan to establish strategic priorities for the district between 2017 and 2022.

The document did not include visible and transparent performance goals, though it did include a set of outcome measures to demonstrate success. What is most notable is the superintendent’s commitment to being held responsible for results. Her goals translate targets for progress on the state’s accountability measures into plain English (e.g., “decrease the performance gap Salem Public Schools has with the state on the percent of Meets and Exceeds Expectations in ELA, Math and Science in grades 3-8 by at least 20%”). She also takes responsibility for increasing college and career readiness (e.g., “increase the enrollment and diversity in AP courses by 10%” and “increase to 100% the number of high school seniors who will apply to college and/or have a postsecondary education plan.”)

While, on the whole, the measures Salem is employing to evaluate success are still overwhelmingly oriented toward state and federal accountability outcomes, it is also notable that the city is now developing a much broader plan in partnership with the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This strategy spans beyond the public schools and into the community to ensure that all of the youth-serving systems are aligned and operating strategically to improve student outcomes across multiple domains.

The state should set aside a portion of the dollars it plans to inject into the Chapter 70 formula for an innovation fund. This dedicated financing would provide reliable multi-year funding that is sorely lacking for schools and districts that want to adequately resource and staff complex initiatives that result in systemic change. Rather than limiting communities to investments in a set of discrete practices determined by the state, this fund should offer communities wide latitude to sow innovation. To encourage local accountability practice, applications for these grants should be judged on both the merits of the proposed intervention and the overall quality of the school and district improvement plans.

One of the more noticeable shortcomings of current Gateway City school and district improvement plans is that they are devoid of information about resource allocation. Of all the plans reviewed, only Haverhill's included space to identify resource requirements for the plan's strategic initiatives (and for most initiatives, Haverhill's planners left this column blank).

Combined with the incentive structures and practices described in recommendations 1 and 2, and the funding to seed innovation outlined here, state policymakers could change the dynamic whereby schools and districts struggle to identify resources and commit to demonstrable outcomes in their improvement strategies. It is difficult to overstate the transformative effects these policy changes could have on communities, positioning them to adapt more rapidly to change and to continuously improve student learning outcomes. However, as described in the third and final paper in this series, to take root these policy changes must be coordinated with efforts to strengthen the school and district governing bodies that are ultimately responsible for providing local accountability.

Methodology

MassINC requested school superintendent performance evaluations and goal-setting sheets (the template superintendents use to establish district goals for school committee to review when conducting their evaluations per state law and regulation). These records requests were filed in 24 of the state's 26 Gateway Cities (excluding two in state receivership). Sixteen cities responded in whole or in part. For this sample of 16 districts, we searched online (i.e., visits to school and district websites and Google keyword searches) to obtain recent school and district improvement plans. In a few instances

where these documents could not be located online, we followed up with administrative offices to obtain them.

While most schools and districts use the improvement plan template provided by DESE, they often leave the outcome section blank. Several schools and districts place outcomes in the strategic objectives and strategic initiatives sections of the document. A handful use their own planning documents. In determining what to cover in our analysis, we dealt with these inconsistencies by including any item described as a "goal" or "outcome," or which used wording that clearly conformed with SMART goal protocol.

As noted earlier, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education defines SMART goals as Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked. Since some of the terms in this definition are subjective, we focused on the Measureable and Timed and Tracked classifications when determining whether measures were genuinely SMART.

Even with these narrower parameters, we often had difficulty conducting a thorough comparative analysis, particularly with regard to timeliness. For example, while the language of a given goal may not have included a time dimension, in some cases it was clear from the document that the intention was to achieve the result within the plan's time frame (e.g., by 2018 in a 2016-to-2018 plan) or with a time frame described elsewhere. As a result, we were forced to infer some of this critical information.

The online appendix includes a full compendium of all of the goals we analyzed and whether we classified them as SMART. In addition, a file posted online with this report provides all of the plans reviewed for this analysis.

Online Appendices

1. Improvement Plan Measures
2. School and District Improvement Plan Sample

Notes

- 1 The first paper in this series terms this theory of action “social accountability” and reviews the underlying conditions that produce it in more detail.
- 2 See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/success/setting-outcomes-targets.docx>.
- 3 State law defines 26 Gateway municipalities; however, two districts (Holyoke and Lawrence) were excluded from the sample because they are currently under state receivership.
- 4 From Chelsea’s District Improvement Plan: “SMART Goal 1: By the end of the 2017–2018 school year, Chelsea educators will effectively deliver MA frameworks aligned lessons and purposeful teaching in order to impact student growth and achievement. Growth will be measured through learning walks, observations and feedback, targeted professional development offerings, and student performance. SMART Goal 2: By the end of 2017–2018, Chelsea educators will use trauma informed practices to build social emotional learning competencies. Educators will create safe and supportive classroom climates and school environments in order to positively impact student growth and achievement. Growth will be measured through learning walks, observations and feedback, targeted professional development offerings, self assessment, and student performance.”
- 5 Interestingly, about half of these measures are now a part of state accountability indicators: five-year graduation rates, English language acquisition for ELLs, and chronic absenteeism.
- 6 Adopted by the Board of Education in 2007 and amended in 2018, MassCore is a rigorous program of study intended to prepare students for college and workforce expectations. MassCore requirements include completion of four units of English, four units of math, three units of a lab-based science, three units of history, two units of a foreign language, one unit of the arts, and five additional “core” courses. Many view MassCore as a stronger predictor of college and career readiness than a student’s achievement on standardized tests.
- 7 See “The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation Part VI: Implementation Guide for Superintendent Evaluation” (Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).
- 8 Even on objective measures, school committee members often voted differently. This was the case in Chicopee.
- 9 See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/accountability/district-review>
- 10 C. Chet Miller and Laura B. Cardinal. “Strategic Planning and Firm Performance: A Synthesis of More than Two Decades of Research.” *Academy of Management Journal* 37.6 (1994).
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Part III:
**Governing Local
Accountability**

The Health of School Committees
and Councils in Gateway Cities

Part Three in a Series of Three Papers

Benjamin Forman
and Connor Lentz

Introduction

The first paper in this series called on communities to establish local accountability practices that complement and augment state and federal accountability frameworks. Using Gateway City school and district improvement plans as our gauge, the second paper argued that communities are not currently supplementing state and federal accountability in this manner. In this third and final paper, we trace the dearth of local accountability practice to fundamental weaknesses in our governing institutions at both the school and the district levels.

Massachusetts law tasks school councils—governing bodies composed of principals, teachers, parents, community members, and students (in the case of high schools)—with developing school improvement plans that include measurable strategic goals. School committees are similarly tasked to approve district improvement plans and to oversee superintendents charged with meeting their objectives. In the second paper, we analyzed both types of plans and found that they rarely include such goals, leaving school councils and districts lacking in their performance of this critical governance function. The absence of transparent and well-formulated goals in school and district plans suggests that communities could do much more to heighten accountability for improved performance both in academics (the core of state and federal accountability policy) and in other areas of student learning, consistent with local values and priorities.

To better understand why school committees and councils struggle to provide this form of local accountability, we examine data from three sources: an online survey we conducted of randomly sampled school council members, results from the most recent Gateway City school committee elections, and various bodies of academic research relating to school governance and accountability. This three-dimensional approach illuminates structural problems and provides perspective on how education policymakers might better position Massachusetts communities to respond to governance challenges that undermine local accountability practices.

Findings

1. Survey responses suggest that most school councils do not play a meaningful role in school governance.

While Massachusetts has had school councils in place for over two decades, there has been very little research examining their function and performance.¹ To learn more, we collected 149 responses to an online survey we conducted of school council members across the state.²

We found that fewer than one-third of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that their councils have influence over the hiring of principals, or decisions regarding the school budget. Only 15 percent agree when asked if their school council shapes curriculum, and just 12 percent report influence over the hiring of teachers. Even in operational areas that seem particularly suited to school councils, such as engaging community partners and communicating strategic priorities to parents, less than half of members surveyed agree that their council performs such functions (Figure 1).

Most concerning is the limited role school councils play as governing bodies charged with establishing strategic priorities. Consistent with findings from the second paper in this series, less than half of school council members report setting measurable goals for academic learning in a school improvement plan. A small majority (58 percent) “agree” or “strongly agree” that their school councils produce improvement plans with nonacademic measures of a well-rounded educational experience.

Two patterns stand out in this area of questioning. First, responses from urban districts diverge from answers provided by others. While school council members from urban districts report slightly more agreement when asked about their influence in budgeting and hiring, they are significantly less likely to agree that their plans include measures of academic learning (28 percent of urban respondents vs. 46 percent of respondents from suburban or rural districts) or goals related to nonacademic

measures of a well-rounded educational experience (41 percent of urban respondents vs. 57 percent of respondents from suburban or rural districts). Second, as evident in Figure 1, responses to these questions vary considerably between principals and other school council members: over 80 percent of principals say their improvement plans include measures of a well-rounded education, compared with just 42 percent of the teachers, parents, and community members surveyed.

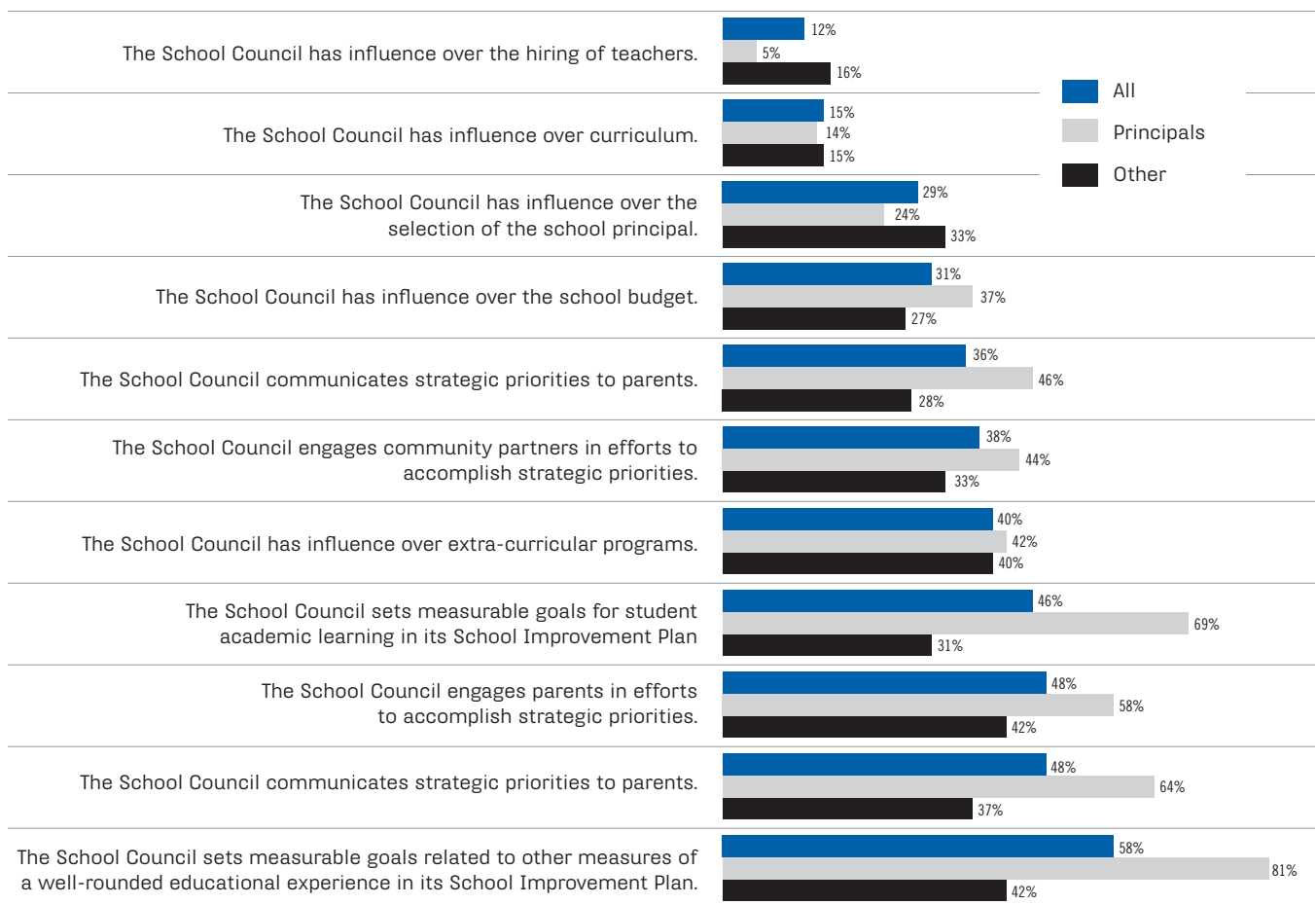
Comments provided to open-ended questions suggest school council members have real role confusion, with little agreement or understanding about what function these bodies serve. Several principals suggested that councils are advisory bodies, not actual boards with responsibilities for shared decision-making in establishing strategic priorities. Many

parents felt that principals see the councils as less-than-useful advisory bodies, as “window dressing” without real value, necessary only for compliance purposes. One parent wrote:

I always wondered about our role. I asked our principal, but never got a response. Nor did we read anything about our role. We never shared the info we received with any parents, unless it was just one on one, with friends, etc.

While overall the survey results indicate that most Massachusetts school councils are not performing their statutory functions, a handful of respondents report that their councils are effective collaborative bodies. Several principals took time to underscore their belief that school councils can serve important purposes. For example, one principal shared:

Figure 1:
Percent Who “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that School Councils Perform Each Function



Source: MassINC survey

As a principal, I work very hard to maintain a strong School Council. I think this has been successful, but it seems somewhat unusual. I don't think that state or district forces have been very helpful in supporting or maintaining these groups—it really falls almost 100% on the principal.

2. The current weak state of school councils has implications for parent engagement and leadership development.

Any discussion about the value of school councils as governing bodies must also consider the important role these institutions could play engaging parents and developing them as civic leaders.

School councils clearly struggle to identify parents willing and able to serve. Only about one-third of parent members responding to the survey report obtaining their seat through a competitive election. Recruitment challenges surfaced repeatedly in open-ended comments; several respondents suggested that finding parents to serve is especially difficult in urban districts with high enrollment churn. Others noted that their school councils struggle to recruit a diverse membership, and they see the resulting imbalance as a source of institutional racism within their community.

As school councils function presently, the time commitment of membership alone does not appear to be the most formidable barrier to parent participation. About two-thirds of parent members report spending less than an hour per week on

school-council-related matters, and generally councils meet just once a month (70 percent) during the school year.

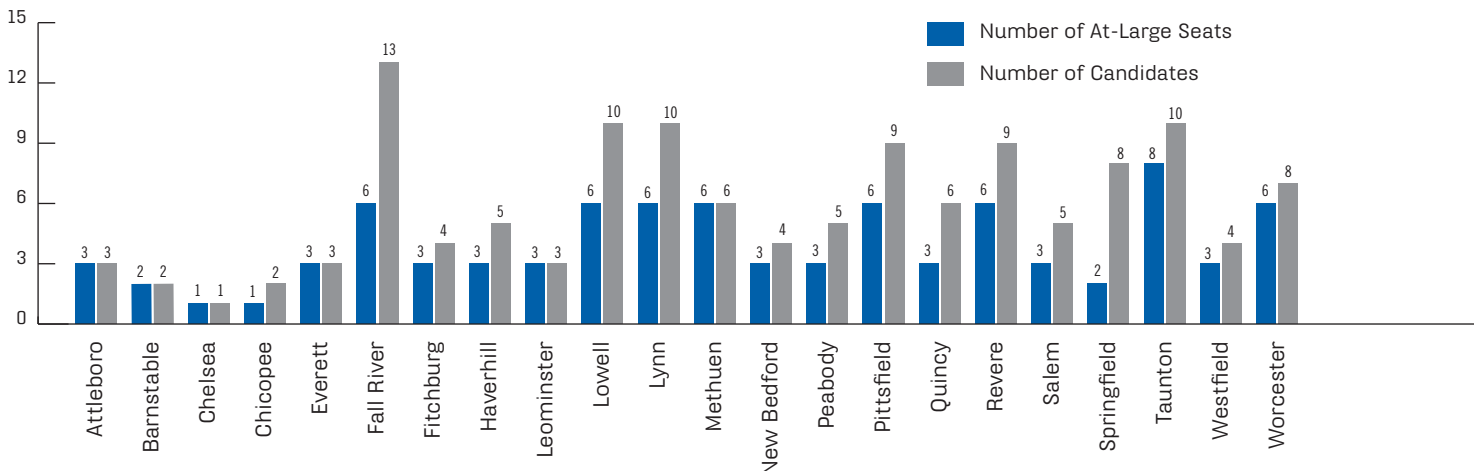
The failure to provide a formative and meaningful experience might contribute to lack of participation. The vast majority of parents (71 percent) on school councils indicate that they sought council seats in order to help improve their schools, as opposed to helping to keep an already strong school healthy (18 percent) or out of a desire to get involved in the community (5 percent).

In addition to expressing frustration with the limited role of their councils, two-thirds of parents say they had no training to prepare them for serving. To the extent that training did occur, which about one-quarter of the parents received, it was largely limited to learning about school council functions. Far fewer received training in how to build valuable skills in areas such as budgeting (8 percent), parent engagement (5 percent), or strategic planning and goal setting (3 percent).

3. With few candidates vying for seats, Gateway City school committee elections are extremely uncompetitive.

In Gateway Cities with limited leadership pipelines, lack of leadership development at the school council level means that fewer citizens are prepared to seek seats on school committees. While competition is not always a positive for improved school performance, as we will discuss in the next section, many Gateway Cities have a critically low number of candidates seeking school committee positions.

Figure 2: Competitiveness of At-Large School Committee Elections, 2017



In 2017 elections for at-large school committee seats in Gateway Cities, on average, there were just 1.5 candidates per seat (Figure 2). With 185,000 residents, for example, Worcester fielded only seven candidates for six at-large seats. In more than one-quarter of Gateway Cities (6 of 22), the number of at-large candidates equaled the number of at-large seats, meaning that each person running automatically won a seat.

Competition was equally low in school committee ward races in 2017 (see Figure 3). Only one of six and two of nine ward seats in Attleboro and Chicopee, respectively, were contested. In Chelsea, none of the eight ward seats saw a competitive election. In fact, two of the wards drew no candidates until concerned citizens stepped forward at the last minute and sought the positions as write-in candidates.

In the 44 ward races where incumbents sought to retain their seats, only 13 faced a challenger, which means fully 70 percent of incumbents on Gateway City school committees ran unopposed. And among the incumbents with challengers, only two lost. Overall, 95 percent of incumbents held on to their seats.

4. Gateway City school committees lack both racial and ethnic diversity, as well as gender balance.

Structural challenges that make it difficult to achieve racial and ethnic balance on Gateway City school committees are particular cause for concern. Figure 4 shows that, on average, the student population of Gateway City school districts is nearly two-thirds (64 percent) nonwhite. Just 14 percent of full-time staff in

Gateway City schools are nonwhite. Research presented in the next section reveals a strong link between the racial and ethnic composition of staff and school committee members. Our analysis of Gateway City school committees finds nonwhite members hold only 11 percent of seats; more than half of Gateway Cities (13 of 24) have no nonwhite school committee members.

Gender disparities are also prevalent. Less than 40 percent of Gateway City school committee members are women, yet women comprise 80 percent of staff in Gateway City school districts. Several Gateway City school committees are extremely unbalanced by gender. No women at all sit on Fall River’s seven-member school committee. Everett’s nine-member board and New Bedford’s seven-member board each has just a single woman. And just two of seven school committee members in Haverhill, Lowell, Lynn, Peabody, Pittsfield and Quincy are women. Highlighting these extremes further, not one Gateway City school committee is as unbalanced by gender in the opposite direction.

Discussion

Our data show little evidence of local accountability practices in Gateway Cities, and academic research on education governance helps to explain why. Beginning with school-level governance and working our way up to school-committee and district-level governance, we explore and contextualize this literature below.

Figure 3: Competitiveness of School Committee Ward Elections, 2017

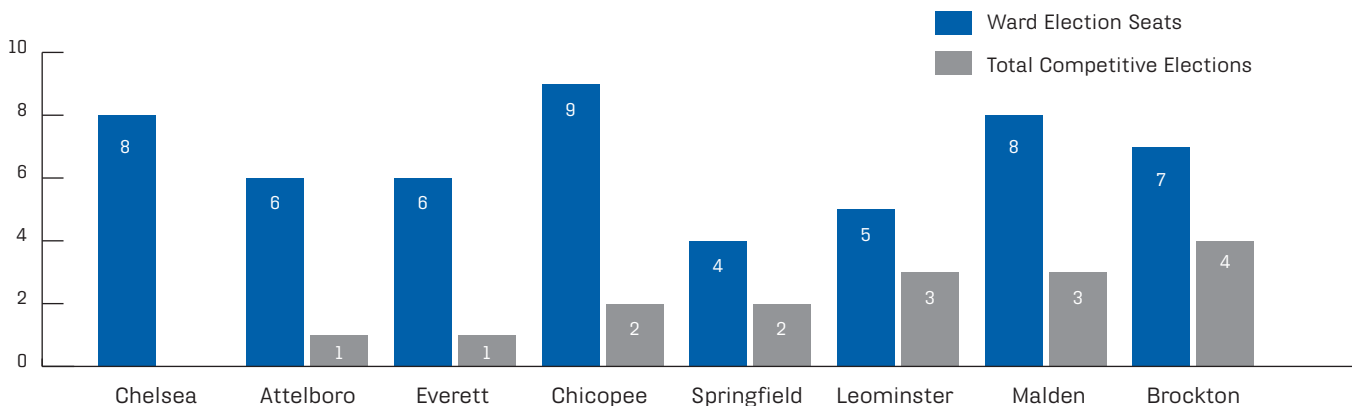
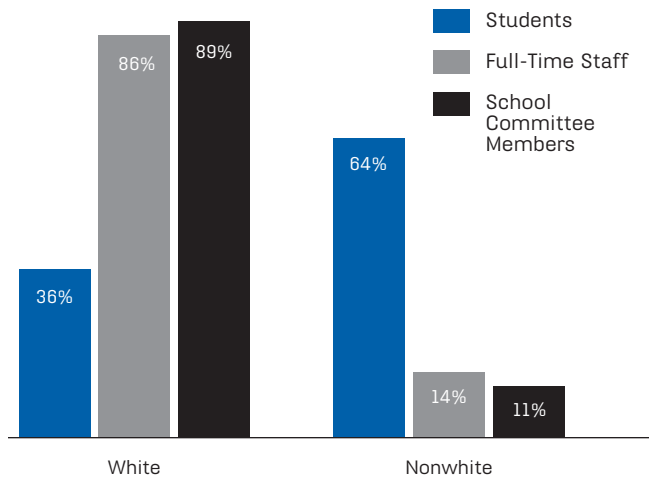


Figure 4:
Percentage of Nonwhite vs. White Representation in Gateway City Student Bodies, School Staff, and School Committees, 2017



Source: Authors' analysis of data from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

1. Increasing local accountability through school autonomy initiatives.

Perspective on the functioning of school councils in Massachusetts can be found in closely related research on school autonomy initiatives across the United States. For decades, education reformers experimented with granting more decision-making authority to individual schools. Although it has been underappreciated, research on this period of experimentation reveals that the success of these autonomy initiatives ultimately hinged on their ability to foster a stronger culture of accountability within the school community.

The first iteration of efforts to provide individual schools with greater autonomy began in the 1960s and '70s, and accelerated through the '80s. A variety of forces precipitated the move to what educators at the time called school-based management. Civil rights-era political leaders wanted to empower communities to take ownership of their local schools, and, much like today, they hoped to redirect central office spending back into the classroom. Education policy leaders believed that allowing school communities the freedom to innovate might help them overcome constraints that make education inherently difficult to change from the top down.⁴

The History and Function of School Councils in Massachusetts

The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) required all schools to form school councils.³ Principals co-chair school councils, and membership must include teachers, parents, community members, and, in high schools, at least one student. While schools can determine the number of members, the council must have an equal number of parents and teachers, and the law calls upon the school to see to it that the body is “broadly representative” of the racial and ethnic diversity of the school. The law also encourages the local Parent-Teacher organization to be the vehicle for electing parent members to the school council. Teachers are selected by a vote of the faculty.

The law describes four main areas of responsibility for councils. They include assisting the principal in: 1) Adopting educational goals for the school that are consistent with local educational policies and statewide student performance standards; 2) identifying the educational needs of students attending the school; 3) reviewing the annual school building budget; and 4) formulating a school improvement plan. Matters related to collective bargaining are the only area where the law specifically prohibits school council involvement.

Massachusetts was not the first state to require parent involvement in school governance. California, Florida, Kentucky, and South Carolina all passed legislation establishing school-based improvement councils with parent participation before Massachusetts added the requirement in the 1993 Education Reform Act. Federal law also has a long tradition of involving parents in school-level governance. In the 1970s, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was amended to require Title I schools to create parent advisory councils. While the 1981 reauthorization of ESEA eliminated this requirement, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) contained a number of provisions relating to family involvement and parent participation in school improvement.

Researchers carefully followed these school-based management efforts. By the 1990s, it was clear that the model had not produced much improvement. Too often, school-based management initiatives focused on governance rather than improving teaching and learning, and most schools lacked sufficient capacity to use their new authority constructively.⁵

In the 2000s, borrowing from the success of independently governed charter schools, educators and education policy-makers responded with a new wave of autonomy initiatives that focused explicitly on driving improvement in instruction. Many of these efforts had baked-in accountability provisions: if schools did not show demonstrable improvement, they could lose their autonomy. Rather than making the objective simply to decentralize governance, these initiatives concentrated on providing more flexibility in hiring, curriculum, and scheduling. To the extent that these new forms of autonomy included alternative approaches to school-level governance, most often the innovation sought to facilitate more collaboration between teachers and school administrators. Drawing further from the lessons of the past, districts also provided much more capacity building in order to position their autonomous schools to thrive.⁶

While the evidence to date is still quite limited, it indicates that many autonomous schools in the latest wave of experimentation have risen to the challenge, producing substantial gains in student performance.⁷

2. Increasing local accountability by engaging families in school governance.

Family involvement in school governance is an established component of state and federal law (see side bar) and the focus of several long-term research-practice partnerships.⁸ This gives us a large body of evidence to draw from as we think about how local accountability practices activate parents to advance school improvement by creating a culture of “social accountability,” as discussed in the two previous papers.

Research findings on family involvement in school governance is mixed. In part, evaluators note that in many places the establishment of school governance bodies that include parents has been extremely weak.⁹ While the results are often disappointing, the literature reveals important lessons about the barriers to successful engagement of families in school governance.

First, if parents are to coalesce and contribute productively to school improvement, inter-parental relationships are key. In many urban districts, these relationships are severely limited for a variety of reasons. Cities simply have more residential churn, which disrupts relationships and makes it difficult for many parents to justify an investment of time and energy in new ones that are also likely to be short-lived. Also, city schools often draw families from many cultural backgrounds. This diversity enriches the school community but also makes it less likely that parents will enter the system with established relationships, and having less in common, they often encounter more difficulty forming new ties.¹⁰ In urban districts with schools that are also socio-economically diverse, there are real and perceived power differences between parents, which creates yet another impediment to the formation of bonds.¹¹

Establishing trusting relationships between teachers and parents is also more challenging in urban districts for reasons similar to those stated above. Studies consistently find that low-income parents often have difficulty interacting with teachers and other school professionals due to status differences. This barrier may be compounded in schools with high percentages of African-American parents, who often have deep reservations stemming from their own youthful school experiences with racial discrimination and conflict.¹²

Schools that effectively engage parents in governance often begin by first establishing trust. They ask and listen to parents to identify their concerns, rather than allowing the priorities of school leaders to frame the relationship. In high-poverty neighborhoods, schools also work to help families access basic services, creating understanding and nurturing rapport before discussing higher levels of parent involvement in school governance.

Schools that succeed in attracting parental participation in school governance also provide a variety of types of involvement, so that every parent has an opportunity to contribute and form relationships. Ultimately, only a small number of parents will likely participate in leadership activities. But with the approach outlined here, those who do become involved in school governance will have more relationships with the larger body of parents, who will in turn have a more meaningful connection to the school community at-large. Together, these school communities work to co-design and continuously improve new programs with the full support of parent advocates.¹³

3. Increasing local accountability through high-functioning school committees.

Given the prevalence of school committees and their central role in providing accountability for school performance, research on their effectiveness in this area is surprisingly limited. Still, several recent studies have drawn a clear line between how school committees execute their accountability functions and student achievement in the schools they oversee.¹⁴ Most notably, these studies suggest that school committees that produce strategic plans with measurable goals do increase their district's performance on test scores and graduation rates.¹⁵ Moreover, they find, it is not the specific goals the school committee establishes that is most important, but rather finding unity of purpose to provide strategic direction. Districts where committee members agree on the accountability outcomes they want schools to produce are more successful at generating improvements in student learning outcomes.¹⁶

Political scientists have researched the barriers democratically elected school committee members encounter in reaching agreement on outcomes. These scholars note that charter school boards do not face such constraints and are therefore much more likely than traditional public school boards to define accountability goals based on student achievement gains.¹⁷ They also point to an intense disconnect between accountability outcomes and superintendent contracts. Similar to the findings reported in the second paper in this series, academic research shows that the contracts school committees negotiate with superintendents rarely include accountability measures, particularly measures related to narrowing achievement gaps between student subgroups, which has been the central focus of state and federal accountability efforts since NCLB.¹⁸

Many scholars have probed the relationship between elected membership and school committee performance to better understand why school committees have not assumed a stronger role in providing accountability. Studies show that citizens are more likely to vote and have more information about the issues when school committee elections take place at the same time as general elections.¹⁹ Similarly, students have better learning outcomes in communities that select school committee members in even-year, higher-turnout elections.²⁰ There is also evidence that school committees are more responsive to citizens in the face of electoral competition, although studies do not find that such competition leads directly to increases in test scores or graduation rates.²¹

4. Local accountability and school committee diversity.

School committee diversity is an urgent topic in the context of local accountability in most Gateway Cities, especially in view of a significant body of evidence that school committees with diverse membership heighten accountability and improve student learning outcomes.

Studies show that parents of color feel better about the performance of their schools when they live in districts with minority school committee members.²² Other research suggests that they have good reason for such confidence: students of color who attend schools in districts with minority school committee members are less likely to be suspended, expelled, or enrolled in special education, and more likely to take higher-level classes.²³

At least in part, these impacts stem from the connection between governance and hiring. School committees with more diverse members seem to hold their systems accountable for hiring more diverse administrators, and in turn, districts with more diverse administrators hire more diverse educators.²⁴

This pathway of diverse school committee membership leading to more diverse staffing patterns appears to be critical to improving learning outcomes. Numerous studies show that minority students fare better in schools with more minority teachers, even when individual students do not themselves have a minority teacher. Moreover, school districts with more minority teachers have fewer minority students in special education, as well as lower rates of suspension and expulsion, higher enrollments in upper-level classes, and higher graduation rates among students of color.²⁵

Studies show that the composition of school populations often changes much faster than the demographic makeup of school committees. From a fundraising perspective, the barrier to entry is generally lower for candidates seeking these seats compared with other elected positions, however, a variety of other factors limit the ability of racial and ethnic minorities to win school committee elections. Most prominent among them is the all at-large structure, which is employed in nearly two-thirds of Gateway City school districts.²⁶ (In at-large elections, candidates run citywide in multi-seat contests and voters are allotted as many votes as there are seats. This math allows one large neighborhood or cohesive voting block to garner all of the seats).

Lessons from Local School Councils in Chicago

In 1988, the Illinois state legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Act, which replaced centralized control of the city's schools with strong decision-making power at the local level. The act created parent-dominated local school councils, with power to hire and fire principals and to approve the school budget. At the same time, it increased the power of principals to manage personnel, and enlarged the role of teachers in decision-making, primarily by providing them with seats on the council.

This reform initiative was the subject of a highly regarded seven-year study led by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. The study found that, on average, the reform led to significant improvements in student learning outcomes. However, when trust was lower among members of the school community, schools struggled to improve. The researchers pointed to the role of principals. Schools with principals who were able to build trust among all parties so that they were in a position to use the power they gained through decentralized decision-making saw the most improvement.²⁷

Policy Recommendations

For local accountability to thrive, a strong focus on strengthening school and district governance is undoubtedly in order. Educators have long understood the fragility of these governing institutions and have sought to find ways to manage around this fundamental weakness, rather than addressing it directly. This will no longer do. We need governance systems with less friction so that they can respond to the constant social and economic change in the world as we know it today, and create more vertical and horizontal alignment across communities, so that high-quality teaching and learning occurs in a variety of settings and students can make successful transitions from one stage to the next. Toward this end, we conclude with three policy ideas for consideration:

1. Make schools a breeding ground for civic leadership.

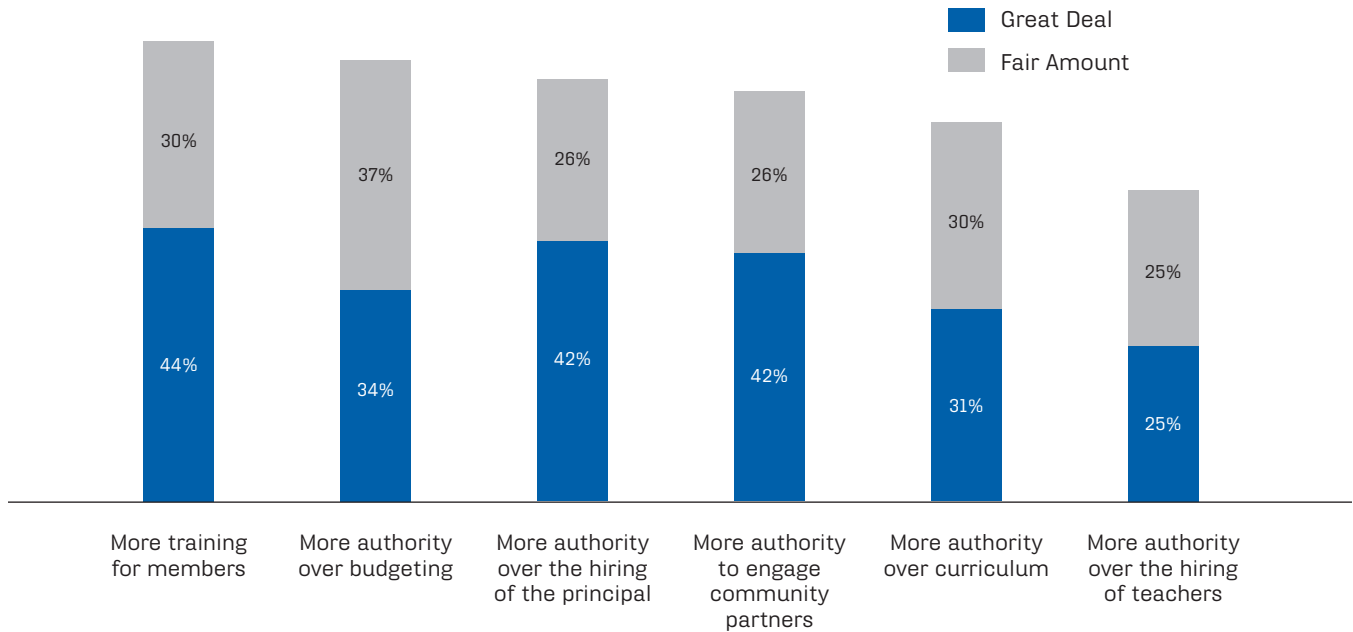
Leadership development is absolutely essential to the fate of Gateway Cities. Small urban communities that face complex challenges in increasingly turbulent times depend on a bullpen of leaders with a large stock of mutual trust. From the research evidence behind the Working Cities Challenge's collaborative leadership for systems-change model to the Lawrence Partnership's demonstrated impact, the powerful connection between leadership, resiliency, and sustained progress merits a considerable push for making Gateway City schools breeding grounds for civic leadership.²⁸

No other system in the community is better positioned to contribute to the leadership pipeline and the development of social capital than the public schools. This potential remains largely untapped. Although most school council members believe that more training would make their councils more effective (Figure 5), they currently receive little to no training. New school committee members must attend trainings offered by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, but preparing members to serve in urban districts, where the assignment is far more difficult and complex than elsewhere is challenging. Research suggest school committee training programs often struggle to impart the necessary skills.²⁹

Positioning schools to develop leaders is largely a community responsibility. However, there are relatively simple ways the state could assist. For instance, DESE could support efforts to better prepare school council members by developing core online training modules. Completion of this limited training session should be required to give parents and community members serving on these bodies a common understanding of the state policy framework under which school councils operate. More importantly, by requiring such training, the state could create a central list of school council members. Contact information for school council members would certainly provide value to researchers seeking to learn about their experiences.

Even more important, this information would allow both statewide and local groups to invite council members to appropriate trainings and convenings. The Mel King Institute for Community Building offers a wide variety of community development trainings that are extremely relevant for urban school leaders. And Gateway City chambers and other community-based organizations that offer leadership training

Figure 5:
Percent of Respondents Who Think the Following Changes Would Contribute a “Great Deal” or “Fair Amount” to the Effectiveness of Their School Council



Source: MassINC survey

would be better positioned to market to parent leaders with easily accessible lists of school council members.

Training and coaching models for school committee members are equally critical. Survey data from the National Association of School Boards show that most members need more training, and that, on average, it takes two years before they feel knowledgeable enough to perform the job well.³⁰ Given the complexity of governance in urban districts and the frequently high turnover on urban school committees, finding more training opportunities is crucial.

Lastly, the decline of local newspapers leaves a leadership void and a major obstacle to the development of strong local accountability practices. While social media can fill this void to a degree, too often citizens take to the medium with strongly felt positions on an issue. We can take steps to prepare members of our schools communities to serve as citizen journalists so that they can learn about the issues from all vantage points and follow them with objectivity.

City Bureau, which trains and pays “Documenters” to attend school committee meetings and gather unbiased information in Chicago and Detroit, is one emerging model.³¹ Not only is this a high-potential strategy for filling the information void, studies show that those who engage in citizen journalism may be more likely to take the leap and run for school committee themselves in the future.³² This is an area where modest state funding could leverage dollars from small community foundations and play a significant role reinforcing our democratic institutions for the long term.

2. Reinvigorate and empower school councils.

The notion that school councils should serve an important function, as envisioned in the 1993 education reform law, remains promising yet elusive. We should redouble efforts to produce more high-functioning school councils with three aims:

- Creating more transparency around school goals and progress toward them
- Engaging parents in school governance and preparing more residents for civic leadership, as described above; and

- Finding balance between school autonomy and proper alignment with state and district goals

Strengthening school councils will require both efforts to clarify their function and powers, and strategies to prepare principals to work cooperatively with school councils.

While the function of school councils will vary to some degree across contexts, we must empower more school councils to develop strategic goals (aligned with state and district learning priorities), and to communicate these priorities and progress toward meeting them to their school communities and community partners. Above all, involving school councils in principal selection and school budgeting seems fundamental to fulfilling their core strategic planning function, and such actions are entirely consistent with current law and DESE guidance.

Some experienced school leaders believe that principals can work with school councils effectively if it is a priority for the district. They suggest making the school council relationship a component of the principal's evaluation to underscore the significance of this component of the job. However, others feel that urban principals are stretched too thin to work effectively and cooperatively with their councils. They point to the charter school leadership model, which often deploys two full-time employees: one responsible for instructional leadership and a second to cover administrative duties. This arrangement positions school leaders to work in partnership with an empowered board.

The "Network of Schools" approach is one model that merits further exploration. It calls for unifying a group of schools under one governing body and a single executive officer. This model could make sense if a school community embraces the same design principles as others in the district or region. A common model in the charter landscape, the network approach could provide an efficient structure for governing traditional public schools in a manner that maximizes local accountability.

Springfield's Empowerment Zone takes this form, and it is has produced a "Roadmap to Student Success," a multi-measure performance framework that provides a holistic snapshot of school performance. The High School of Commerce, which falls under the Empowerment Zone governance structure, led a process to develop a "graduate profile" that articulates the

full range of outcomes stakeholders want students to achieve. Their efforts to understand local context and future trends, and how they related to learning and development embody the principles and practices of local accountability.

3. Support efforts to develop new governance models at the community level.

Structural challenges that undermine the performance of school committees must be addressed. At a minimum, we should pursue changes that allow these bodies to reflect shifting diversity in school populations. We should also explore ideas for more radical change to school committee governance.

An important governance debate with bearing on the issue of school committee performance concerns whether these bodies should be elected or appointed. Currently, school committees oversee K-12 instruction. While this focus is critical, instruction is complex and does not lend itself to direction by an elected body. The evidence is pretty clear that voters do not follow pedagogical debates, and few lend their support to a school committee candidate based on his or her track record on improvements to teaching and learning.

Some use this evidence to argue for moving to mayoral control of local school districts. While some research suggests that the mayoral-appointment approach may have benefits, especially in large difficult-to-manage cities with a history of dysfunctional governance, on balance the track-record for mayoral appointment of school committees is mixed. Furthermore, removing public education from the electoral process reduces the visibility of education issues and eliminates the invaluable social capital that elections generate.³³

Gateway Cities should consider inventing new governance structures that are more akin to children's cabinets (see sidebar p. 45). Cities could provide these bodies with jurisdiction over youth-serving systems and services from birth through the transition into college and career. This model would promote public discussion about investments and strategic priorities for youth development more broadly, leading to accountability for outcomes such as kindergarten readiness, social-emotional development, and college and career success, which are currently very difficult to ascribe to any one actor in a community's child development system.

A children's cabinet model may well function best as a hybrid governing body, made up of both elected representatives and

those who hold key positions, such as presidents of local community colleges, community health centers, early learning, and afterschool providers. Such a body would undoubtedly have a larger store of political capital, and the ability to pair significant school system resources with those in local government and private nonprofits.

The move to a radically different approach to education governance is supported by a large body of research that shows electoral coalitions are unstable and rarely broad enough to have influence over all of the systems that contribute to the performance of students in urban districts. Successful urban school reform initiatives are led by cross-sector governing coalitions that include childcare and human service agencies, health providers, and community-based organizations that are able to establish mutual trust through efforts to enhance the welfare of underrepresented groups in the community.³⁴

Combined with stronger school-level governance (or governance provided by networks of schools), a hybrid body for district-wide oversight would allow communities to re-think the function of its central office. The superintendent of schools, one of the highest-paid professionals in an urban community, would be a CEO responsible (and accountable) for developing strategy, building connectivity, and improving outcomes across systems.

Finally, this shift in responsibility might lead to less effort on delivering administrative services at the district level. With schools free to seek this support competitively from regional providers, a more efficient delivery model could emerge, one that the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, and many other education-policy thought leaders have recommended in the past.³⁵

Learning from the Design and Function of Children's Cabinets

Although children's cabinets originated as state-level efforts to coordinate policy, the practice is increasingly common at the local level.³⁶ In particular, many cities use children's cabinets to create integration between early-learning centers, the public schools, and other service providers. These initiatives seek to align the efforts of families, educators, health care and human service providers, the private sector, and city departments. Generally they have appointed governing boards with members representing both the public and private sectors, who provide general oversight and leadership on resource development, policy, and advocacy.³⁷

Harvard's Education Redesign Lab has worked to support a broader mission for children's cabinets. Their approach relies heavily on mayoral leadership, often with the school district playing a central role as the "hub of services" provider and the superintendent co-chairing the governance structure. This reworking of children's cabinets strives to ensure that all participants of the governing body have decision-making authority so that the cabinet is able to provide high-level leadership, align resources, and produce systems change. Consultants serve as honest brokers, facilitating the work of the cabinet to keep it moving.³⁸

Notes

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- 2 While it is difficult to disaggregate to Gateway Cities with precision, the results are surprisingly stable across community contexts. See methodological appendix for more on sample size and sampling methods.
- 3 See: M.G.L Chapter 71, Section 59C.
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- 9 See Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002). For Massachusetts, see Bryant Robinson. "A Study of the Role and Accomplishment of Selected Urban School Councils in Pursuing the Goals of Education Reform in Massachusetts." Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst (1997); Maxine Minkoff and others. *Massachusetts Education Reform Review Commission Annual Report* (2001).
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- 16 Michael R. Ford and Douglas Ihrke. "School Board Member Definitions of Accountability: What Are They, and Do They Impact District Outcomes?" *Public Performance & Management Review* 39.1 (October 2015), 198-222.
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