Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

Leading for Equity: What Have We Learned?

It all began in an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Sophie Sa, the founding Executive Director of the Panasonic Foundation, and two education consultants who were working for her at the time — Richard Lacey and Michael Holzman — were sitting in Sa's living room, having read what seemed like hundreds of proposals for school improvement grants. "Although many of the proposed projects had merit," Sa would later write, "what impressed us most was how piecemeal and limited in scope they tended to be."

As the three commiserated, they struck on an idea, based on three conclusions: "first, that more than money per se, schools needed ideas and knowledge; second, that school districts had to be part of the change effort; and third, that the change that was needed would take a long time to bring about: five years at a minimum, but probably closer to ten." Part of the idea was rather than identify an intermediary, the Foundation itself should become a technical assistance provider — deploying consultants rather than distributing grants.

The Panasonic Foundation District Partnership Program was launched in 1987 with formation of a long-term partnership between Santa Fe Public Schools in New Mexico and the Panasonic Foundation. Since then the Foundation has partnered with an additional 37 school districts, as well as 5 state departments of education.

While a historical recounting of this program could well be of interest and value to some audiences, *Strategies* is a publication squarely aimed at current system-level educational leaders. And so what follows is not so much a recounting of a foundation initiative as it is a coalescing of practical insights and applicable learning that we have drawn primarily from school system leaders who partnered with the Foundation during our three-decade effort. The driving question that shapes this issue is this: *What have we — the Foundation and its partner school districts — learned that has been most powerfully effective in accomplishing systemic improvement that advances equity and excellence in student learning and student outcomes?*

The observations that follow are drawn from more than 30 interviews with current or retired district, school board, and union leaders, retired Panasonic Foundation executive directors, and current or past Panasonic Foundation senior consultants. The content in the following pages is also drawn from the Foundation's decades of experience working hand-in-hand with school system leaders to "break the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes by improving the academic and social success of All students: All Means All!" Topics explored include the following: collaboration among

administration, union, and school board; prioritizing equity; organizational culture; leadership and school board governance; resource allocation; accountability and use of data; and the power of networks.

If you find helpful insights in the pages that follow, please don't hesitate to share this publication widely. ◀

— Scott Thompson, Editor

From the Panasonic Foundation's Executive Director

Since its founding in 1984, the Panasonic Foundation has been deeply rooted in supporting equity and educational excellence for all students by investing in systemic change and capacity building. Over the years, this work has yielded important results and insights from district leaders on school improvement, equity strategies, and student support services. In this issue of *Strategies*, we capture some of those insights and reflect on the Foundation's three decades of leadership in equity-based district partnerships and networks to improve student outcomes.

As the Foundation prepares for a new chapter in its history, we will continue to focus our efforts on improving educational outcomes and opportunities for children — especially children from low-income backgrounds and from underrepresented communities — to succeed in the global 21st century. Over the next few months, the Foundation will refine a new strategic framework, allowing us to incubate new ideas and develop new partnerships in areas that are key indicators of student success, such as literacy, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math) education, and college and career readiness.

We hope this issue of *Strategies* will be useful to educators, district leaders, and community stakeholders in their ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes and help prepare students for success. On behalf of the Panasonic Foundation and our Board of Directors, we offer our sincere thanks and gratitude to the many school system leaders, community stakeholders, consultants, and staff who were instrumental in advancing the Foundation's district partnership program. ◀

— Alejandra Ceja

Leading for Equity: What Have We Learned?

Question: Is it possible in a large urban school district where the teachers' union passed a resolution of "no confidence" in the administration and school board, that in a matter of months the same union president and the same district superintendent would be working so cooperatively that they were co-presenting on labor-management collaboration and finishing each other's sentences?

Answer: Yes. It's not only possible; it happened. Here's how.

Three Legs of a Stool

In Columbus, Ohio, on April 6, 2006, the legislative assembly of the Columbus Education Association (CEA) passed a resolution of "no confidence" in the superintendent of Columbus City Schools (CCS) and the Columbus Board of Education. The resolution raised 15 issues, including failing to provide competent leadership in every school, failing to provide a plan to improve the district, and ignoring concerns of parents, driving them to leave the district and enroll in charter schools.

According to education consultant Betty Jo Webb, what gave rise to the resolution was a void in communication between the administration, the union, and the school board. Then Columbus Education Association President Rhonda Johnson points out that, in fact, there was communication going on through the CEA's publication *Voice*, but the communication was one way. In reference to the district administration, Johnson says, "We communicated *about* them, not *with* them."

When the resolution passed, the public school system in Columbus was deep into a long-term partnership with the Panasonic Foundation, and Webb was one of several Panasonic Foundation Senior Consultants visiting the district on a monthly basis. Both Johnson and Webb remember when Webb got Johnson and then Superintendent of Schools Gene Harris into the same room, stood at the door, and said, in effect, "You're going to be in this room until you figure it out." The basic strategy was to talk things through. As Webb explains, "We get so energized, and we're so passionate about our part of the work that we fail to get an understanding of the other partner's part."

This initial sit-down evolved into a series of meetings, sometimes with small groups and sometimes with larger groups, that took place every other week, with locations alternating between district and union offices. According to Webb, a particularly helpful strategy involved conducting individual interviews with participants in advance of meetings so that themes and unexpected areas of convergence could be established going in. Each meeting concluded with written agreements about actions to be taken. Fulfilling those actions was a way to build trust. From these efforts emerged the Joint Labor-Management Committee, which operated through problem prevention as well as problem solving concerning contractual issues and the quality of teaching and learning conditions.

Over time, the air was cleared, and the parties were not only regularly communicating but actively collaborating. In January 2009, for example, the Columbus Education Association and Columbus City Schools submitted a joint proposal to the NEA Foundation: "Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative." The proposal included the following language: "CEA proactively engaged the CCS administrators and school board to support the most recent operating levy. In fact, CEA raised $67,000 to support the levy effort. CEA and CCS are engaged in an 'all children can learn' partnership with Panasonic [Foundation] to create the role, structural and accountability changes necessary for all students to achieve at higher levels and to close the achievement gaps."

During the period of improving relations between the district administration and the union leadership in Columbus, there was also a change in the chair of the Board of Education. For a time, the Board had been at war with itself, with, for example, one member arriving at each meeting wearing fatigues as an expression of his hostility. "The Board of Education meetings went from being the best war movie on TV on Monday evenings," according to Webb, "to something where the press did not even want to attend," because the theatrics were gone.

We lead off with this particular anecdote for several reasons. For many years, the Panasonic Foundation looked for a commitment between a district's administration, teachers union, and school board to work in — or at least towards — a collaborative relationship as a prerequisite for entering into long-term partnership with the Foundation. This was referred to as the "three legs of a stool," and it represented the belief that the parties in a school system are all part of one interdependent system. Sadly, the Foundation found itself gradually backing away from that commitment during the past decade. Too often it seemed that an oppositional union leadership could unilaterally prevent an otherwise promising partnership from even beginning if the Foundation held to this standard. But the transformation that happened in Columbus, beginning in 2006, is possible wherever there is a mutual commitment to working through differences and investing in a set of interrelationships that will better serve the children and young people attending the schools, which are the point of focus for all parties concerned.

The Columbus story is certainly dramatic in its degree of transformation from a dysfunctional relationship to one that stood out as an example of what is possible when shared commitment, respect, and a focus on common concerns replace walls of suspicion and mistrust. At the same time, there is nothing particularly histrionic in the strategies and tactics employed to bring about the change. It primarily came down to facilitated dialogue that took place regularly over a period of months and led to the formalization of structures for heading off problems before they became exaggerated.

Similar lessons could be drawn from a number of school systems that partnered with the Panasonic Foundation. Gloria Rendon, who was a teacher and principal with Santa Fe Public Schools before serving as Superintendent from 2000 to 2005, prioritized developing open relationships with union leaders and board members. She met monthly, or more frequently when needed, with leaders of the two unions — one instructional and the other maintenance. "You could talk to each other civilly and agree to disagree on lots of issues," she says.

Many Panasonic partner districts, including Santa Fe, involved union and school board representatives on teams that traveled to the Foundation's Leadership Associates Program (LAP) events, where teams from the array of partner districts came together in large-scale, off-site events. These events enabled union and board leaders to directly participate in district conversations about key strategic initiatives. As Rendon points out, these union and board participants in LAP then became advocates for district efforts.

Rhonda Johnson
*Past President of
Columbus Education
Association*

"During my time in Highline School District we faced difficult leadership styles from the union," says John Welch, who was Superintendent in Highline (WA) from 2005 to 2011. "You have to have broad shoulders and put up with stuff. If we're committed to success, we have to keep coming back to the table. We have to think together long enough to reach a solution."

If there are parties on both sides of the table with the will to keep coming back, because the education of children and young people hangs in the balance, then progress toward collaboration becomes possible where even a cease-fire had seemed quixotic. There is an African proverb that Rhonda Johnson cites in relation to bringing parties together to advance the work on behalf of students: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want go far, go together."

Naming Race, Prioritizing Equity

"The reality is that Americans have a difficult time engaging in conversations around race," says retired Panasonic Foundation Executive Director Larry Leverett. "If we don't engage in those conversations, we're not going to be able to address root causes of inequity."

Highline School District (WA) Superintendent Susan Enfield reports a "seminal moment" in her growth toward being an equity leader who is able to publicly name race as a critical factor. She was participating in a Panasonic Foundation LAP institute. These events, in addition to providing keynote presentations and a substantial amount of facilitated district-specific team time, also included cross-district learning activities.

In reference to a cross-district conversation at a LAP institute, Enfield says, "One of the women at my table (I believe she was a school board member from Oakland; she was African American) and we were talking about how do we tackle issues of racial equity. I said I've always sort of felt that it's not my place to do that, because of who I am: I'm this little white girl in her pearls. And she looked at me and said, 'It's exactly because you are the white woman in pearls that your voice is going to be heard very differently and by different people than mine will. And that's why you do have to speak up.' For me that was a moment where I thought I was being respectful in not wanting to speak on behalf of those whose experience I can't understand, because I haven't lived it. I was really just copping out. I was giving myself a way to avoid really hard conversations. That stayed with me over the past several years as we've continued to push this work in Highline."

Susan Enfield
Superintendent,
Highline School District

"Our data clearly shows that race is at the center of inequity," says John Welch, who preceded Enfield as Superintendent in Highline and now serves as Superintendent of the Puget Sound Educational Service District. "[At Puget Sound] we have focused on training our employees to understand institutional racism and its impact on students and their educational experience and on creating policies and practices that support racial equity," Welch says. "It is an ongoing journey. We hold a vision of eliminating opportunity gaps by leading with racial equity and becoming an antiracist, multicultural organization. This includes a lot of work around exploring the development of historical racism and its impact and understanding how systems have come to reflect the dominant culture through the oppression of others. Once you have that training and knowledge building under way, you can better tackle your systems and structures to make sure they are fair. We believe this work has to get into the bones of the organization, not just in a vision statement, so that every day you can interrupt — and even better, dismantle — practices that are not supportive of equity. It's hard work; it's emotional work; it's exhausting work; and it's work that must lead to action. You can talk about race and being anti-racist, but you have to take action."

To move from words to action, the Equity in Education group at the Puget Sound Educational Service District has introduced a racial-equity tool for decision making around policies, practices, resource allocation, and hiring. The racial-equity tool asks a series of questions, says Welch: "How does that program or policy or procedure educate about current realities of race and racism and opportunity gaps? How does that policy or procedure

encourage sharing about race and racism? That's all in service of raising racial consciousness."

Welch adds that training is significant. "We completely redesigned our new employee onboarding system, so that folks get training right up front and training throughout the course of the year." Perhaps what will most powerfully communicate advancing racial equity as a priority is the embedding of four equity-related competencies in everybody's job description, which will go live during the 2018–19 school year. "That's getting it into the bones of the organization through naming it in job descriptions and supporting people to achieve these competencies and hold one another accountable along the way. Training, support, and monitoring for progress are all part of how we think about evaluation and accountability."

"Drilling down to the names and faces behind the data and then identifying those high-leverage strategies that work for real kids within a particular population" is a way to get the equity work into the bones of the organization, according to Deborah Winking Contino, who was a Senior Consultant for the Panasonic Foundation working with several Panasonic Foundation partner districts, including Racine Unified School District (WI). "One thing we identified in Racine was that dual-language programs were successful. The achievement gap had literally disappeared among students in the dual-language program. That was noteworthy in a district where there's a 30 percent achievement gap for kids of color. Why? It was so clear when you did learning walks that they had defined a set of strategies that addressed what that population needed." According to Contino, strategies that were evident included the following:

- total physical response (coordinating language with physical movement)
- environmental print (labeling things in classrooms to build vocabulary)
- culturally responsive instruction
- home visits
- common professional development for teachers
- collective efficacy attitude among the program teachers

Too often, district rhetoric about prioritizing equity and seeking to close achievement gaps gets well ahead of specific strategies and interventions for addressing the unique needs of students who are struggling on the back end of those gaps.

John Welch
Superintendent, Puget Sound Educational Service District; past Superintendent, Highline School District

Taming the Beast of Organizational Culture

Culture eats strategy for lunch, as the saying goes. According to Sampson County Public Schools (NC) Superintendent Eric Bracy, culture also eats data and any number of other things.

As defined in a previous issue of *Strategies*, organizational culture "is the underlying shared beliefs, history, assumptions, norms, and values that manifest themselves in patterns of behavior, or, in other words, 'the way we do things around here.'" As Edgar Schein, in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, points out: "The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead." As Michael Bracy, Superintendent of Jones County Public Schools (NC), observes: "Culture is paramount to any change."

"We don't pay enough attention to changing culture," says Leverett, who had been Superintendent in three districts before becoming Executive Director of the Panasonic Foundation. "Too often we rush to solutions, craft technical responses, and engage in implementation without ever examining the soil into which the initiatives are being planted. A toxic culture results in spoiled fruit." Similarly, former Superintendent and Panasonic Foundation Senior Consultant Allan Alson notes that "we frequently run way too fast before trust is built. Building trust as a capital strength for agency is really critical."

What is least and most effective in terms of changing the culture or reculturing? "You can't change culture by memo," according to Joshua Starr, who was Superintendent in Stamford (CT) and Montgomery County (MD). "A lot of it is modeling."

Pablo Munoz, who was Superintendent in Elizabeth Public Schools (NJ) prior to becoming Superintendent in Passaic (NJ), agrees: "I'm not going to change culture by beautiful poetic words. Culture changes through action. If we want to change a culture of low expectations, we change curriculum and graduation requirements."

This approach is well illustrated by Scott Elliff, who was a Panasonic Foundation Senior Consultant prior to becoming Assistant Superintendent for one year and then Superintendent for another seven years of Corpus Christi Independent School District (TX). Elliff had worked in the district's central office prior to becoming a consultant with the Panasonic Foundation, and when he returned as Assistant Superintendent, he found that the central office was dysfunctional both within itself and in its relationship to district schools. The central office was viewed as a regulatory agency that gives directions and levels sanctions. What was missing were structures for collaboration and information sharing and school support.

Scott Elliff
*Past Superintendent,
Corpus Christi Unified
School District*

"Culturally, that became a big part of our work as a leadership team," Elliff explains. "We moved a lot of people around and out. There were some structural aspects to changing culture. We put structures in place that forced cultural change, forced people to sit down and talk with one another. We provided a lot of professional development to our central office leaders — from instructional folks to our maintenance director."

One structural practice that was aimed squarely at changing the culture was to bring all administrators at the level of program director and above together monthly for the purposes of professional development and information sharing. "Everybody had a role in creating those experiences," according to Elliff. "There were people in that group who'd worked in the district for over 20 years and never met formally with some of their peers at the same level in the organization. Getting those people in the same room and putting them in a situation where they had to know one another and talk about kids together and talk about their work and what it was they wanted to be as leaders in the district, that was transformational. They came up with solutions for how they shared information with campuses and how they responded to campus needs, how they worked with one another to solve problems" and how to avoid working in silos.

"I think the role of any leader is to shape the culture of the organization," says Marcia Lyles, who is Superintendent of Jersey City Public Schools (NJ). "Changing culture comes from building an infrastructure that will support that change and ensuring that everyone in that community understands there are some non-negotiables about what has to happen for children; but also to say, 'I'm not blaming you.' It is a slow shift sometimes. You build infrastructures that can support learning. You have that tension where you give them some safe spaces, but you also say, 'You've got to move forward.'"

When Lyles arrived in Jersey City as the new Superintendent in 2013, she came to a culture that placed a premium on how long an individual had been there and on maintaining the status quo. Lyles was not only an outsider, but she was also the first African American female to lead the district. Jersey City prides itself on being one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the country, with a student population of about 28,500 that is 32 percent African American, 38 percent Latino, 17 percent Asian, and 11 percent white, but the topic of race was generally skirted. "People had not disaggregated data, and so they were not focused on who was doing what," Lyles explains.

Marcia Lyles
*Superintendent, Jersey
City Public Schools*

"I learned a couple of things along the way. You had to be courageous, but you didn't have to be foolhardy. You didn't have to make people shut their ears and say, 'I'm not listening to you' or make them think they're being blamed for the state of affairs. But you also really had to shine the light. It's giving people a really clear picture of where we are; helping them have a sense of urgency about how we're going to get somewhere else. So let's do this without any blame."

A powerful driver in reculturing Jersey City Public Schools was the adoption of equity-focused instructional rounds, which Lyles encountered through her involvement in the Panasonic Foundation's New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS). Instructional rounds involve direct observation of classroom practice by small groups of educators and a debriefing process where evidence gathered from observations is organized into patterns. Elizabeth City, Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, the authors of *Instructional Rounds in Education*, identify four essential elements of instructional rounds:

1. Leaders of the school to be visited identify a **problem of practice** that is visible in the instructional core and pertains to the school's and/or district's overall strategic direction in advance of the rounds visit.

2. Observers **visit classrooms** while teaching and learning are taking place and gather detailed and nonjudgmental evidence that relates to the identified problem of practice.

3. The teams that collect evidence in classrooms share and analyze their findings in an observation **debrief**, identifying patterns that shed light on the problem of practice.

4. Drawing on the evidence and patterns, participants brainstorm preliminary **"next level of work"** considerations for using resources to make progress on addressing the problem of practice.

Instructional rounds counter the isolation that is typical of educators, who are too often left alone to try to address issues without the benefit of multiple experiences and perspectives from their peers.

Lyles' participation in equity-focused instructional-rounds visits through the New Jersey Network of Superintendents led her to think about how to shape a systemwide conversation on equity, the instructional core, and the relationship between the two. "How do you share and build community around that?" she asked herself.

During her second year in the network, Lyles developed a plan for instituting instructional rounds with an equity focus in schools throughout her district. She engaged several NJNS program design team members to conduct instructional-rounds training sessions with district and school leaders in August and December of 2015 and began conducting rounds visits in Jersey City schools in January 2016. By the end of the 2015–16 school year, 100 percent of school leaders in the district had participated in at least one rounds visit, and 40 percent had hosted a visit.

"So much of what it takes to create a truly equitable school system has to do with profoundly changing culture."

Currently every school in the district hosts two rounds visits per year, with a post-rounds consultancy between them. The post-rounds consultancy takes place four to six weeks after the rounds visit and requires the leaders of the host school to report on steps that have been taken since the visit, and provide an opportunity for a subset of those who conducted the visit to ask clarifying and probing questions. Lyles says that conducting post-rounds consultancies has been "one of the most powerful pieces" of the overall process.

Part of the cultural influence of the systemwide adoption of instructional rounds has been the development of a common language across the system. Lyles tells of visiting a school during a districtwide professional development day and overhearing a group of math teachers developing lesson plans around a set of "look-fors" related to their school's "problem of practice" — terms that came straight out of the district's work on instructional rounds.

"So much of what it takes to create a truly equitable school system has to do with profoundly changing culture," notes Highline School District Superintendent Enfield. "That's far harder than implementing a practice or providing professional learning." She

says she underestimated the extent of what was required culturally when the district moved to eliminate out-of-school suspensions. "That wasn't just about amending board policy and procedure and providing resources and training and support for staff; it was really about adults having to reorient themselves to young people in their buildings and engage with them in a very different way. Leaders who are truly leading for equity and are willing to make those hard decisions and do what's right for children have to be mindful that we can't do it at expense of adults. We need to acknowledge the personal and the professional impact that that kind of culture shift has on school staff and the time that it takes to do that."

Enfield adds, "I also think it's about really listening to what your people are telling you. I'm constantly learning that there's so much power in people being heard. Even if there's nothing you can do about their concern, there's power in them just being able to vocalize to you that it's hard. That human element of changing culture is really important."

System Leadership and Board Governance

One could argue that this entire issue of *Strategies* is about leadership, and that would not be a stretch. At the same time, while some of the insights gathered speak specifically to leadership for reculturing or leadership that names race or leadership focused on resource allocation, other insights speak to leadership writ large.

The highest leverage for systemic improvement in education "begins with leadership commitment," argues Panasonic Foundation Senior Consultant and former Superintendent Alson. It comes down to "willing, committed, courageous leadership. Willingness to make some folks uncomfortable." According to Janice Jackson, who was Deputy Superintendent of Boston Public Schools, "You have to know yourself and where you want to take the system, and, at the same time, you also have to be part of a team."

A powerful leadership concept that extensively resonated and deeply influenced leaders associated with the Panasonic Foundation over the last decade and a half can be traced to Ronald Heifetz and his internationally acclaimed book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers.* Heifetz makes a distinction between work that is technical and work that is adaptive. An article he co-wrote with Marty Linsky, "When Leadership Spells Danger" (April 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership*), explains that "problems that we can solve through the knowledge of experts or senior authorities are *technical* challenges. The problems may be complex, such as a broken arm or a broken carburetor, but experts know exactly how to fix them."

"In contrast," the authors continue, "the problems that require leadership are those that the experts cannot solve. We call these *adaptive challenges*." As Heifetz explained in an interview appearing in the Spring 2002 issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*: "Adaptive challenges require a different form of leadership because our current model looks to authorities to have the answers. But adaptive challenges require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments that arise from numerous places in the organization. When we look to authorities for answers to adaptive challenges, we end up with dysfunction."

"Technical work is easy but not high leverage," says retired Corpus Christi Superintendent and past Panasonic Foundation Senior Consultant Elliff. "The adaptive work — really getting people engaged in learning how to solve the sticky problems — is hard, but it's worth it." Elliff says there was a great deal required in Corpus Christi to prepare school board members, district and school leaders, and educators to confront adaptive challenges. "It's going to feel like a struggle," he emphasized, "and it's going to feel like suffering. You need to be willing to stay in that to make the sort of long-term changes we want. There was a lot of pressure to see rapid turnaround, to see all our academic problems fixed within one school year. I had to learn how to manage that whole process of going deep."

Elliff says that leading for adaptive change bore fruit in two areas. When he returned to the district, there was an obvious need to address problems around the quality of teaching and learning and in relationships in schools between teachers and students, students and students, teachers and teachers, and administrators and teachers. There had been four chief academic officers in two years! "Teachers and principals had been left on their own to find

their way," Elliff explains. "We worked really hard … and used some existing frameworks" to increase student engagement in learning and to improve the quality of relationships. "Success came in being zealous about those two areas of work. We were able to see evidence not just in student performance, but in changes in language, teaching behavior, and behavior with students." Data confirmed a reduction in incidents of bullying and in other disciplinary indicators.

The district held a Superintendent's Leadership Conference every August, involving about 600 educators and administrators. In the past, a new emphasis was introduced each year. "I saw there was a role for me as leader in the district to provide way-finding for people," Elliff says. "That meant that we weren't throwing out everything from before." Rather, it was an annual opportunity for reiterating and deepening the same essential work, year after year. "We were holding out a lantern for people as they struggled."

A genuinely adaptive leader understands that he or she does not have a corner on ideas or answers. "A school board member can ask a question that will change the direction of a district," notes Christian Rhodes, Chief of Strategic and External Affairs in Prince George's County Public Schools (MD). A board member can "ask a question that may seem from left field; it may not be always rooted in facts, but it is their personal experience or an anecdotal piece of information that they received from a community meeting or an email from a constituent. In many of those cases, if the administration gets past its visceral reaction that 'we know more,' if you look at the root, it's generally a good question." A thoughtful board member "asks probing questions that cause the administration to do some self-reflecting, and in many cases come back with a thought-out plan of how we're going to address that," Rhodes adds.

While many question the value of school boards (and there are, in fact, far too many cases of dysfunctional boards driving out potentially effective superintendents), when school board members understand their collective role as stewarding the public school system on behalf of the community it's designed to serve, and when both the board and administration stay in their lanes, collaborative work to advance an agenda of equity and excellence can result.

"School board members are regular people from the community who are reflective of their constituents, and they set the bar and the direction for what the future of the city will look like, how the funds are spent, what kind of education is happening, what kinds of improvements are happening, and they have the pulse of the kids, the parents, the community, and the politicians," says Stan Neron, who has served on the Elizabeth (NJ) Board of Education since 2009. "It's a vital role, and something that should be valued. One thing that is key is that we don't run the school district. We simply are stewards over the process. We've got to follow process, and that's where the success comes into play."

"For school boards to contribute to public school systems," notes Bernie Dorsey, who has served on the Highline (WA) Board of Education since 2007, "it's incumbent to recognize that [bringing] the voice of the schools into the community is as important as [bringing] the voice of the community into the schools. Both responsibilities need to coexist. You can't be just that watchdog for the community that's going to keep the schools in line, and you can't be just the school representative that's going to get the community to toe the line." Keeping both of those functions in balance brings a perspective that school systems don't otherwise have.

Stan Neron
Member, Elizabeth
Board of Education

One fast lane to board dysfunction is when board members act as individual directors rather than as members of a unified board. "The pitfall of a lot of school board members is they run for office and they get elected because there's a singular issue they are really focused on," Dorsey says, "whether it's lack of challenging curriculum or rigor or cultural relevance. The board needs to function as a team, and they need to intentionally work on that; otherwise they are just five or seven or nine individuals. Obviously you're not going

to be as successful, because now you've got a superintendent who feels as though she or he has got five or seven or nine bosses and not the one voice. To me that's not fair to the superintendent, and it's not good for keeping superintendents."

On some ineffective boards, you not only have individual members directing the superintendent but also interfacing with other staff. "Our key person that we talk to is supposed to be the superintendent," says Neron. "But what happens is the pressure of community causes you to go outside of those lines. At the end of the day, even if you, as a board member, can get a principal or teacher to do what you want at a school, that's going to backfire eventually, because it's outside of the communication lines. It's outside the chain of command, and it's counterproductive."

Successful school boards invest in their own ongoing development, and a key part of that concerns the induction of new members — helping them transition from the narrows of the issues they ran on to understanding the full array of issues the board, as a collective body, is responsible to oversee. Facilitated retreats, self-assessments, information sharing, and data analysis — if approached thoughtfully — can contribute to the development of individual members and to the board as a whole.

In terms of data analysis, Neron says it was overwhelming when it was all concentrated at the end of the year. What has been more effective is to hold quarterly reviews: "Now we get the chance to say, 'That change you talked about, we need to do it sooner rather than later, because we don't want to see this school nose-dive.'"

"Just because you have an equity policy doesn't mean it's going to happen."

The Highline School Board has also benefited from quarterly Saturday retreats. The morning portion included not only school board members and the superintendent, but also members of the superintendent's cabinet. The aim has been for the board and administration to get to know each other's thinking. "A couple of years ago I had a temper tantrum — in a diplomatic way — around the fact that our attendance data was not acceptable," Dorsey recalls. "We really needed to pull the fire alarm on that. It was an interesting discussion because I was definitely assertive. And I think that's something that staff hadn't seen from me before. We needed to collectively tackle this. It enabled them to see that our hearts were in the right place. We weren't looking for that gotcha moment. We were looking for an opportunity to say, 'OK, here we are, warts and all. What can we collectively do to resolve this or move towards where we want to be?'"

During the afternoon portion of Highline's quarterly retreats, the board and superintendent reflected on and built consensus around issues that arose in the morning. Additionally, "we always reserved an hour for venting or dreaming," Dorsey added.

School boards can play a critical role in advancing a school system's equity agenda. In Highline the equity policy comes first in their policy book so as to make "equity a lens for everything else." Jackie Heftman, who has served on the Stamford (CT) Board of Education since 2008, agrees with the importance of enacting an equity policy, but she is quick to add that its implementation "constantly has to be monitored. Just because you have a policy doesn't mean it's going to happen."

What was more impactful than the equity policy in Stamford was an initiative, known as Middle School Transformation (MST), that began before the equity policy was established. Stamford's MST aimed to de-track the system's middle schools — an undertaking that held significant promise for improving equity but that also provoked strong resistance from some segments of the community. It took place under the leadership of then Superintendent Joshua Starr, together with a school board that had his back — at least in the early phases. Over time several school board members opposed to Starr's agenda were elected, and eventually Starr left to become Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. But according to Heftman, "Middle School Transformation is now a done deal. It's the way we do business in Stamford. We deliver education heterogeneously."

Allocating Resources

If you're serious about systemic, sustainable approaches to advancing equity and excellence in your school system, the allocation of resources requires strategic attention. "A strategy is merely a nifty idea if not accompanied by a plan of action that is resourced," points out Puget Sound Educational Service Superintendent Welch. "You have to have difficult conversations about how to use money, time, and human talent."

Sampson County Superintendent Bracy can bear that out. Following a resource allocation meeting in the spring of 2018, he was approached by a principal whose school was receiving fewer resources because it was serving a higher-level socio-economic population than another school in the district. Bracy responded by saying, "I will transfer you to that school today, and you will have those extra resources." The principal's immediate response: "No, sir."

An example of the higher concentration of resources in higher-needs schools in Sampson County is around instructional coaches. "In the past I tried to have instructional coaches in all schools," Bracy explains. "When resources got tight we'd spread them out — a coach here for two days and there for one day. Now I really focus those resources in our more challenging schools every day so they can make a bigger impact. It's hard for itinerant coaches to have much impact. Now those more challenging schools are rising up academically and gaining ground."

Eric Bracy
Superintendent,
Sampson County Public
Schools

"It's all about students getting the instructors and materials they need to succeed," says Passaic Superintendent Munoz. "We budget that way. All our resources go toward making sure each student has the proper allotment."

"When partnering with outside organizations," former Boston Public Schools Deputy Superintendent Janice Jackson points out, "they need to be in step with what you're doing internally. Do not let them control the agenda even if it means giving up resources."

"What's the theory of implementation?" asks Kyla Johnson-Trammell, Superintendent in Oakland (CA) Unified School District. "We have a partner who just received a lot of money from a foundation, and they wanted to give free eyeglasses to all of our kids. 'How much funding do you have and for how long?' I asked. 'OK, the funding runs out next year. What's the long-term plan for sustained funding? Is this just a one-year piece?' I explained our strategy — already in place — of providing eyeglasses to kids, because we have health centers at many of our schools that serve kids who are underserved. 'How could you see your one-year opportunity connected to what we are already doing?' I asked."

"Where we are now," says Johnson-Trammell, "is really having a strategy around 'system-ness' partnerships versus working with every single partner that comes into the system, that has a resource for free. We're really thinking through those invisible steps of implementation. Who's going to hold what? And if there isn't the bandwidth to actually use this resource, do we just say no? How are we measuring it? What's the best model and structure to use the resource so that we actually get traction?"

"At Highline we were starting down the road of changing our resource allocation," says Welch. As with Sampson County, the approach involved increasing resources for high-need schools, which necessarily meant decreasing resources for schools in more affluent parts of the district. "We got pushback from more privileged and affluent parts of the district, which fortunately were a minority. We needed our more affluent, white parents to believe that our school system is only great when it works well for all students. We needed them to care deeply about the educational experiences of our black and brown kids. Some parents can get into that space and be supportive of change, and for others it can be the first time they really stopped to think about it."

The district tackled the challenge through dialogue. A recession brought on three years of budget cutting. "When we were going through budget cutting, we brought our community together and had people sit with people not like themselves: more affluent people sat

with immigrants. They would have to reach consensus. That was a really powerful experience because somebody who traditionally had power now had to work through a different process with other people who were in a different situation. They had to listen and hear from one another. At the core of leading for equity are relationships with one another."

Accountability and Use of Data

On the topic of accountability there was broad consensus among the dozens interviewed for this issue of *Strategies* on the value of what is variably called shared, reciprocal, nested, or mutual accountability. It's an approach that upends the autocratic model of accountability in which top leaders hold underlings' feet to the fire and ramp up the pressure until they get the results they seek. "How do we make ourselves mutually responsible and mutually accountable for the results we're seeking?" asks Webb. A phrase used by Contino gets at the same idea: "We're all responsible for the success of everyone."

Part of what's required to put effective accountability in place, according to Rhodes, is "starting with data and not stumbling into it, which is hard to do without trust, because districts are judged around what their data show. The only way to improve is to know all the facts and what kind of supports are needed. It's less about compliance and more about support."

"At best the data helps us ask better questions," says Starr. "What's the problem we are trying to solve?"

Oakland Superintendent Johnson-Trammell highlights "the importance of being clear about how you plan to evaluate any given service at the outset. At the end of the day every service that may be external — health or free breakfast or transportation, anything that may not be academic — how clear are you about the tie-in to academic measures that you are trying to improve or interrupt? Do you see this as a way to drive down chronic absenteeism, which is a predictor of kids not reading by a certain grade? Or do you see this as a way to bring more parents into the school? Being really crisp about that, which is hard at the systems level. Is it the structure that will get us there? A great spot for us is having a data platform where we're able to link key practices to student outcomes."

The Power of Networks

"The power of networks really does matter," Highline Superintendent Enfield insists. "This is hard work, and it's only getting harder in the political landscape that we find ourselves living in. As superintendents in particular, we're an N of one in our systems. Having people that you can go to and learn from and trust is really, really important. And learning what the work can look like in other contexts is really important."

Part of what Enfield is getting at is that superintendents are in a singular position within their school systems: they alone are direct reports to the board of education, and every employee is working under their leadership. Recognizing this unique position and the value of connecting superintendents across districts was part of the impetus behind the Panasonic Foundation's New Jersey Network of Superintendents, which recently completed its 10th year as a cross-district community of practice. The Network has a strong focus on equity and includes a range of districts, some with high concentrations of children of color and children in poverty and others serving largely affluent suburban families. Sixteen New Jersey school districts had membership in the Network during the 2017–18 school year. "The rich discussion and the opportunity to be able to interact with other superintendents is incredibly rewarding," says NJNS member and Superintendent of Elizabeth (NJ) Public Schools Olga Hugelmeyer. "It's just the best professional development for us. We all recognize that."

"In the New Jersey Network of Superintendents we sat across from districts very different from us," notes Rachel Goldberg, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction with Passaic Public Schools (NJ), "and we went and saw what their students experienced. Having West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District in the Network was fabulous for us."

Passaic Public Schools serves a student population of 14,637, comprising about 92 percent Hispanic, about 4 percent black, about 2 percent Asian, and about 1 percent white students. Close to 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and nearly a quarter are English Language Learners. The West Windsor-Plainsboro district, which is located near Princeton University, serves 9,670 students, of whom about 5 percent are economically disadvantaged and about 3 percent are English Language Learners.

"While I know folks in West Windsor-Plainsboro were looking internally at equity, we looked at them and a lot of the schools as external points in equity," says Goldberg. "What do students attending those schools experience? How do we duplicate that regardless of what school our students walk into? There's been a lot of learning around that, and so I think that's helped us to set our goals to say, 'How do we become the best in an urban context?' and 'What does that look like when we're designing student experience starting as early as possible? Are those students sitting in those schools having a better learning experience than our students?' Our district and school leaders have visited Scotch Plains-Fanwood, West Windsor-Plainsboro, and Freehold Regional High School District [all members of NJNS]. They've helped us define what equity looks like."

Pooling intelligence across districts is a high-leverage strategy.

Goldberg led a team of 10 school and district leaders from Passaic on a visit to West Windsor-Plainsboro "so that my team could see the level of instruction that was happening. At West Windsor-Plainsboro the instruction was extraordinary, and that's because of the work of the teachers." As a result of the Passaic visits to West Windsor-Plainsboro, district supervisors and instructional coaches in Passaic have a continued dialogue, visits, and curricula review, with a particular focus around middle-grades math instruction. "This has provided a terrific partnership between the two districts at the ground level," Goldberg reports.

More recently, in collaboration with East Carolina University, the Panasonic Foundation organized another cross-district network, involving four rural county school districts in eastern North Carolina. This network is named Focusing on Rural Challenges in Education, or FORCE, and it involves regular visits and conversations across the four districts. "In our FORCE work, Jones [County Public Schools] really talked about their 'data talks' and how they use data for benchmarks," says Eric Bracy, Superintendent of Sampson County Public Schools. "I started doing that immediately. It has paid such great dividends." In fact, two of the other districts in FORCE, Duplin County Public Schools and Pender County Public Schools, also adopted data talks from Jones County, in which district and school leaders come together every nine weeks to review data, including data on student performance, student and staff attendance, and subgroup representation in advanced courses, against benchmarks; and then they talk through what could have been done differently and what will be required to meet goals going forward. As Eric Bracy puts it, "How are you going to take this data in front of you and turn it into the reality of moving your school forward?"

Cross-district networking activities, including those undertaken by NJNS, FORCE, and the Leadership Associates Program, provide strong evidence that while each school district is in some regards unique, school system leaders are grappling with sets of challenges that are fundamentally common. Pooling intelligence across districts is a high-leverage strategy whose potential has only begun to be realized.

Closing Thoughts

The complexities of structural racism, organizational culture, and system dynamics are, unfortunately, as doggedly present today as they were more than three decades ago, when the Panasonic Foundation launched its district partnership program. The insights contained in these pages were hard won. While they do not include a skeleton key for unlocking the full potential of what our school systems hold in terms of achieving equity and excellence on behalf of all students, we do believe that there is much here that can aid school system leaders who are serious about moving their systems ever closer to the high goal of "All Means All." The Panasonic Foundation has learned a great deal from the school system leaders it has partnered with, and it is our hope that readers will apply insights from these pages to their own efforts to significantly move the needle on advancing equity and excellence in our public schools.

— Scott Thompson