Leadership for the Schools We Need

A handbook for business people who want to make a difference on school boards

By Todd Feigenbaum
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The Public Policy Institute of New York State, Inc.
152 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12210-2289
518/465-7511
http://www.ppinys.org
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The need for new directions

Imagine a public education system in which fewer than a third of the students master the material they are taught in high school. In which more than half of middle-school students fail to meet state standards. And in which over a third of the students fail to complete high school with their class.

You might be surprised to learn that these facts describe the performance of the school system in New York State. And not just of our poor, urban systems, either. Those facts describe the average school in New York, spending an average of over $11,000 a year per pupil. And the money being spent is almost the least of our worries. Far more important is the fact that our whole future, as individuals and as a society, is tied up in the quality of our educational system. The performance we’re getting from the system today means that tens of thousands of young people are being sent out into a world in which they are not prepared to compete effectively—and it means that our economy, too, will fall short of its potential.

Today the leaders of the business community, in global Fortune 50 corporations and in small businesses alike, recognize that educational performance is the most important long-term public policy issue facing them. Business has worked actively in the public policy debate, and with federal and state governments, to press for higher standards and better outcomes in our schools.
That involvement in policy setting is important, and must continue. But individual business people also can—and should—take a hands-on role in actually implementing change at the level of their local schools. National education policy is important. But as the late House Speaker Tip O’Neill once said, “all politics is local.” And the same is true of schools. The place where policy is translated into action is right down the street, at your local school.

There are many constructive ways in which business people can involve themselves in local schools, from one-on-one mentoring, to collaboration in school-to-work programs. But in New York and many other states, they’ll find they have the most leverage in the place where the local decisions get made, and that’s on the local school board.

Business people can make a signal contribution to school boards simply by bringing business skills to the table:

• The ability to identify, articulate and focus on important, clearly defined goals.
• A willingness to be guided by data, by facts—not emotions or fads.
• A preference for specific and documented results, not generalized assertions.
• An awareness of the need to listen to, respond to, and meet the needs of, customers.
• An ability to develop a plan for change, for improvement. And then to follow up on its implementation—to figure out if it’s working, and to fix it if it’s not.
• An ability to find good people for the job, and to get the best performance from these people.
• And a predisposition to try to get the most value for the dollar.

Hands-on, personal involvement in the actual running of a local school system can be very demanding, both emotionally and in terms of time. And the only rewards are spiritual,
because the job of school-board member is an unpaid one. But done right, it can work wonders for the schools involved. And it will also give business leaders new insights into, and a new sense of urgency about, the broader policy issues involved in education reform—from curriculum, to teacher training, to the way school staffs are hired and motivated.

I know a little bit about this, because I’ve been there. At times serving on a school board can seem like one of the most thankless jobs in the world. Yet in our system of public education, it’s really up to individuals at the local level to provide the leadership required to create excellent schools.

Having served on a school board for seven years, I can tell you that yes, it’s hard work. However, it’s also very rewarding to see the impact you can have. Even something as simple as asking one question at a board meeting can shed light on a problem that few people knew existed. Here is an example:

Many school boards conduct the real work of the board in various committee meetings—a curriculum committee, an audit and finance committee, a policy or personnel committee. It’s in these committees that many important issues can and should be tackled, information gathered, and thoughtful recommendations created for forwarding to the whole board. Some boards choose to have few committees and attempt to tackle most issues with the full board; my impression is that this approach tends not to be as effective as a well-organized committee structure.

The school board that I serve on has chosen to have its curriculum committee review a couple of academic areas each year. For instance, in one year we might review the math curriculum along with art and music. Another year we might spend our monthly meetings reviewing the foreign language program and social studies. In these meetings we invite faculty members and administrators to make presentations about the programs, curriculum, and instruction they provide.

Some years ago I developed a question I like to ask of each group that makes a presentation at our curriculum committee meetings. The question is simple: In a perfect
world, what else could we do for you—what resources would you like that you currently don’t have? I make it clear that we can’t necessarily provide every item they might request, but we want to know the kinds of things teachers need so we can prioritize resources.

At first, teachers and some administrators weren’t sure what to make of this. The question was too novel. That in itself was quite interesting to me, because many of us who manage organizations in the private sector realize how important it is to support our people—to make sure they have the resources they need to get the job done and get it done well. We realize that our success depends on how well our people succeed in doing their jobs.

Well, an interesting thing happened a couple of years ago when the science teachers in our high school met with our curriculum committee. After they concluded an impressive presentation, I asked my question. Their reply floored me. The teachers told us that what they really needed were classrooms! They carefully explained that some of them didn’t have classrooms and had to roam around the building all day with all their materials on a cart. They might teach one period in one room, another period in another room, and so on. Ten minutes before the start of a biology class, a teacher would be racing down the hall with 25 microscopes on a cart to get to his next room and get set up for class. I immediately wondered what effect all that jostling had on the microscopes and other delicate scientific equipment. I remember turning to our school board president—someone I had gone to high school with in that very same building—and seeing her in as much shock as was I. We hadn’t had a clue that this was a problem. Their prepared presentation had made no mention of it.

And the problem turned out to be much greater than we had realized. A year later when we were reviewing our foreign language program, I again asked my question about what we could do for the foreign language teachers, and
guess what they said they needed: That’s right—CLASSROOMS! We had French teachers in our middle school and high school teaching in rooms they couldn’t decorate with posters and information about France and French, because they were only guests in those rooms for a period or two. Again, shock and exasperation were what we felt on the board. How could we not have known about this?

The problem of classroom shortages (some English teachers also didn’t have rooms) had been incremental in its development. As the fads of public education had changed during the 1980s and 90s, many of our special education programs, which previously had been contracted out to the area BOCES, had been brought back into our own school buildings. Yet no new classrooms had been constructed to accommodate those programs. Instead, other teachers had been displaced and forced to work off carts as they migrated around our buildings looking for a place to teach. We affectionately began referring to these teachers as our “cart people,” with rather vivid images in our minds of teachers wandering the halls looking for a place to spend an hour with students—kind of like homeless people looking for a place to spend the night.

Why didn’t our school board know about this? We had gone through a building expansion program in our school district just a few years before, and yet the building principals in the high school and middle school had never brought this issue to our attention. Why didn’t they? Maybe they had never asked the teachers, themselves. Maybe they felt this really wasn’t important. Maybe they didn’t want to be bothered with all the work that goes into expanding a building. Maybe they were told the district had other priorities.

We don’t know, exactly. But there is one thing we do know: the careers and the compensation of these administrators were almost totally insulated from the success or failure of the teachers whom they supervised.

This flows, in a sense, from the fact there is no bottom line in public education. For people in business, poor management can and does have disastrous consequences. But nobody inside public education pays the penalty for failure—only the students, their parents, and their future employers.
That different sensitivity is why business people are often attuned to getting results in a way that many public school officials cannot be. And it means that business people can bring something valuable to the oversight of our professional managers in public schools. Business people can help demand more accountability from schools and those who run them.

My experience has left me even more convinced than I was when I went into the job that our schools need change. But it has also left me convinced that change is possible.
Chapter 1

A Reality Check on our Schools

You know what they say about Congress. Poll the voters, and they're inclined to say only bad things about the Congress as a whole. But poll them about their own districts' representative in Congress and, well, you're likely to hear only nice things. That's why almost every member is almost always re-elected to the institution that almost everybody says is up to no good.

It's the same with our local schools in America. There's a broad, national consensus that our school system as a whole is falling short of what's needed. But ask us about our own, local schools, and we tend to say they're pretty good. A Gallup Poll found that 51 percent of Americans rate their own school systems with an “A” or “B.”

Well, maybe your own local schools are indeed doing well. But maybe they're not doing as well as you think. It is very unlikely that there is any school, anywhere, that is as good as it can be.

And even those kids coming out of exemplary systems—of which New York undoubtedly has many—will find their own future undermined by the quality of education being given to less fortunate young people. We cannot expect to enjoy forever a world-class standard of living in the United

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1 2001 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup survey, “The Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.”
States, if we persistently fail to educate so many of our young people to world-class levels. An economy with prosperity for all cannot be built on the learning and skills of only a few.

The reality is that today, far too many of our young people are emerging from school without the quality of education they need for the quality of life we want them to have, in the competitive world in which they will have to make their way.

Data from international comparisons routinely demonstrate that America’s K-12 public schools often do not measure up to those in many other countries. Here are a couple of examples:

- The 1999 International Math & Science Survey documented that 8th-grade students from the United States perform at a statistically significant lower level in geometry than students from numerous countries including: Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Belgium, Slovak Republic, Bulgaria, Russia, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Canada, Slovenia, Australia and Malaysia.

- In science, U.S. 8th graders scored poorly in their knowledge of physics in relation to their counterparts in these countries: Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Hungary, Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Russia, England, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hong Kong and Canada.

More broadly, social critic E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has offered this observation:

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Take a young boy or girl from a typical American family who goes to a typical American school, and imagine that child growing up in France or Germany, Japan or Taiwan. Few would choose to make the experiment. Most Americans believe, as do I, that this country, with its traditions of political freedom and its generous optimism, is the greatest country in the world. But the evidence is strong that that very same young child would grow up more competent in those other countries than in the United States—through having learned much, much more at school in the early grades. Although our political traditions and even our universities may be without peer, our K-12 education is among the least effective in the developed world. Its controlling theories, curricular incoherencies, and what I call its “naturalistic fallacies” are positive barriers to a good education. Scholars from abroad who study American schools are astonished that our children, who score very low in international comparisons, are actually as competent as they manage to be. Considering their very American vitality and independent-mindedness, one thinks ruefully of what these children could become under a good, demanding, and fair educational system!³

How do schools in New York fit into this picture? There is a wealth of data now available to the public (and, of course, to school-board members) in New York State. This information can be very helpful to those who want to improve the schools, if they will use it—while at the same time providing ample evidence as to why improvement is needed.

With the development of the New York State School Report Card, New Yorkers have an important tool for examining the performance of their schools. Published by the New York State Education Department, this annual project creates a school report card for every school district

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in the state. During the first few years of this publication, it was refined and enhanced. Today it contains a wealth of information (available in print or at the State Education Department website: www.nysed.gov) that can be used to assess the performance of any school district and the individual schools within that district. It also can be used to compare districts against one another.

While the report cards contain large amounts of information, some sections are much more important than others. One key number to focus on is the percentage of students reaching mastery on state exams (85 or better on a Regents exam and a “4” on the 4th- and 8th-grade assessments). With the decision by the New York State Board of Regents to require all students to participate in a Regents program during high school, school districts can no longer offer the option to students of choosing a less challenging non-Regents program. However, in order to soften the transition to an all-Regents program, the State Education Department gave local school districts permission to lower the passing grade from 65 to 55 on Regents exams during the first five years of this transition.

Data from the school report cards show that while many districts can get a large percentage of their students to pass some of the Regents exams (at least at the 55 percent passing level), the number of students who score at or above mastery is usually very limited. It’s great that a district can report that 90 percent or more of its students have passed a Regents exam. But the real measure of the academic quality in a school’s program is the percentage of the students who learned the material well enough to master it and receive an 85 or better on the Regents exam.

When you ask a typical group of teachers if they want their students to master a particular unit in the curriculum before they move on to the next unit, they will routinely say yes. If mastery is important for a particular unit, should not the goal for all the units—or the entire course—be mastery?

Public schools have rarely looked at academic achievement in this light. Minimum competency to meet the standards has generally been the goal—not mastery. Now,
however, the Commissioner of Education and the Regents are raising the mastery issue by reporting that data in the school report card. Unfortunately, the data on mastery are not comforting. An analysis of Regents exam results reported for the year 2002 reveals the following numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math A</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Environment (formerly Biology)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global History</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math Sequence 2</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. History &amp; Government</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NYS Education Department data.

On each of the Regents examinations less than a third of the students were able to offer evidence of mastering the material in the course. If less than a third of students master the material they are taught, can we really call our schools successful?

The results of student achievement in middle school, like the mastery percentages in high school, show little progress. Test results for 1999-2001 show that in both mathematics and English fewer than half of the students in the state reached the state standards on the 8th grade assessments.

**Dropouts—Another Key Performance Indicator**

Another key piece of data in the school report card is the percentage of students who complete high school with their class. Assuming school systems are operating to meet the needs of their customers (students), one would reasonably expect high completion rates and low dropout rates.
That is just what most school districts in New York State report. However, this particular piece of data in the school report card does not agree with calculations done about the actual numbers of students who stay in school.

Based upon the definition of a dropout and the methods used to track dropouts, the typical school district in New York State has been reporting an annual dropout rate in the 4-5 percent range. Yet when a cohort survival analysis is conducted tracking 9th graders through high school, it shows that less than two-thirds of the students in the state finish high school with their class. Over the period from 9th to 12th grades, there is a loss in the size of the cohort of more than 38 percent (the cohort decline between grades 1 through 8 is only 2 percent). In other words, more than one in three 9th graders fails to make it to graduation in the normal four-year period with their class. In many urban areas the figure is well over 50 percent. Some students, approximately 25,000 in the 2000-2001 school year, do transfer into GED programs, but this number does not account for the massive decline in the student cohort between 9th and 12th grades. We also do not know how many of those GED transfer students actually complete the GED program.

In 2001 the 12th grade contained 151,043 students statewide, but when this same group of students was in 9th grade just three years earlier, there were 245,320 students in the class. The big question is: why did the class shrink by over 94,000 students?

The explanation of the disparity between the reported numbers of dropouts and the real numbers involves the reporting practices used by school districts. It turns out that districts have not had to account for those students who did not return to school in the fall if they had already turned age 16 (17 for New York City), because that age is the end of mandatory public education. If a student who reaches 16 decides not to return to school, the school district has not had a responsibility to track his or her where-
abouts. (That practice has now been changed by the Commissioner of Education under a new definition and a new reporting system for dropouts.)

The numbers reported by school districts also represent only the number of students who, by very limited definitions, drop out in a one-year period. Yet the annual dropout rate is not the important number. The number that is most indicative of the success or failure of the state’s schools is the 38 percent, the percentage of students who fail to complete school with their class. This number reflects the true number of students leaving school compounded over the three-year high school period of 9th-12th grades and then combined with those students who leave high school to pursue a GED program.

So more than a third of students fail to finish high school with their class. Fewer than half of students reach the state standards in middle school. Fewer than a third of students master the material they are taught in most subjects during high school. Maybe our public schools need more improvement than we thought. And maybe there is something we can do about it.
Chapter 2

Taking on the Job

So the schools need help, and business wants to help. The question is: how?

Business organizations like The Business Council in New York State, and the Business Roundtable at the national level, have taken a pre-eminent role in pressing for education reform policies that focus on high standards—on defining standards, on measuring where schools fall short, on holding them accountable for their results. That’s an important and constructive role.

At the same time, and by the thousands upon thousands, businesses and individual business people across the country are involved in myriad efforts to be helpful to their local schools. These efforts run the gamut from donating equipment, to tutoring and mentoring, to summer jobs for teachers. And they, too, are important and constructive.

But there’s also a tremendous need for the business skills and real-world perspective that individual business men and women could bring to the governance of the education system, through serving as members of local schools boards.

Those who are charged with overseeing the large and complex organization that makes up a school district often do not have the expertise or knowledge needed to properly carry out their duties. Unlike many other states, New York requires no mandatory training for school board members. In the absence of significant knowledge about education or leadership skills, too often school boards tend to over-rely on school administrators. Administrators, in turn, often have an “inside the box” outlook that could benefit from a different perspective.
I first ran for my local board of education as a representative of a parent group that had organized in the early 1990s. Parents, grandparents, and other taxpayers in our community had been developing increasing levels of frustration with the public schools—schools that had been considered high quality in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, the period in which I had attended these same schools. There was a feeling that academics had taken a back seat to other concerns, that the district had taken its eyes off the primary mission of fostering strong student achievement. There was also a feeling that parents had come to be viewed by school district officials as “the friendly enemy” whenever we questioned the direction of the schools.

Many of us who were involved in organizing the Community Education Forum believed that school officials did not want to admit there were serious problems confronting our city’s schools. It was almost as if they were hoping that the problems would simply go away. Our group, on the other hand, believed that by hosting public forums about critical issues facing our schools, we could begin to shed some light on these problems and focus public attention. Although we were successful in attracting numerous citizens to a variety of forums in the mid-90s, we still felt that the policy makers—the board of education and the administrators—were resistant to the fundamental change we believed was needed.

A Run for the Board

In the spring of 1996, I volunteered to run for the board of education as a representative of this citizens’ group. That year’s election featured seven candidates competing for two open seats on the board. I chose to highlight my candidacy by focusing on the importance of raising student achievement and on making our schools more effective and efficient.
I ran not only as a concerned parent—but also as a business person who would try to make sure that tax dollars were spent wisely and effectively. Too often those who run our public schools have not experienced the financial discipline and the accountability for results that private-sector management can provide. Business people bring that experience to school boards. They can help boards understand the importance of clearly defined objectives and the importance of deploying resources in the most effective ways to accomplish those objectives. Business people are also keenly aware of the effects of increasing property taxes. My community is one, like many in upstate New York, which has seen an erosion of its tax base accompanied by a less than booming economy. Increases in school taxes are just one more burden on businesses and citizens, especially those with fixed incomes.

I wasn’t running as an anti-tax or anti-education candidate. Quite the contrary—I was running as a big supporter of public education, quality public education. I simply wanted to ensure we were getting the best possible bang for the buck, that we were creating a culture of excellence in our schools, and that we were challenging our students, teachers, administrators, and our community to do the best possible job. I wanted to bring a customer focus to our school district. How could we better serve the needs of students, parents, and the businesses that employ our graduates?

By raising those issues I was upsetting the status quo. There were factions in the community that didn’t care to have the schools criticized in any way. There were some teachers who were afraid of the push for excellence. Yet many other teachers were very supportive of my candidacy. They knew it was time to shake things up. They knew our district needed some new leadership.

How do you run a successful school board campaign? In my case I relied upon the constituency that I represented, the Community Education Forum. We had a core group of 15-20 very active members of this group to which we added many more friends and concerned citizens.
The Mechanics of Local Politics

So, you’ve decided to run for your local board of education. Hopefully, you have at least a few people who can help you with the effort. Where do you begin? The first thing is to find out what you have to do and when. Contact your school district’s central office to get the calendar of dates for filing petitions and other forms. This office can also supply you with the petitions you’ll need to collect the signatures required to appear on the ballot. Although the number of required signatures is not high, it does take some time to collect them. As with all official petitions, you should collect at least 25 to 50 percent more signatures than are required to cover yourself for signatures that may be invalid. If you think the race could be highly contested, someone could challenge your petitions to keep you off the ballot. Make sure you understand how to petition and what the requirements for valid signatures are.

The petitioning exercise can be a great campaign tool. Get a few of your friends and supporters to go out and collect signatures for you at school functions, PTA meetings, at supermarkets, and door-to-door. Give your volunteers a handout about who you are and why you are running, so they can leave something behind with each voter they ask for a signature.

Targeting Your Efforts

In most communities, it’s sad to say, very few people vote in school board races. You are often lucky if you can get 10 percent of the eligible voters to turn out. Yet when you are the candidate, this can be a helpful situation. Instead of spending a lot of time, effort, and money trying to appeal to all the voters, you first need to find out who votes in school board elections. (This all assumes, of course, that you have opposition. In many communities the difficulty of attracting candidates for the board is so great
that you might have an uncontested race. If that’s the case, you can stop reading this passage; just make sure that at least one person votes for you on Election Day!

If you have opponents, you’ll want to focus your efforts on the voters who tend to participate in school elections—the people who have come out in the past to vote for board members and for or against school budgets. They are the ones most likely to turn out again. You can obtain the lists of people who have voted in previous elections from your school district. This is public information—not who people voted for, but whether or not they participated in a school board election in any given year. Some districts might charge a small photocopying fee to provide you with the lists, while others might not. The information may also be available in electronic form in some districts.

**Reaching the Voters with Direct Mail**

Once you have the lists, unless they are already in an electronic database, you or your volunteers will need to put these voters in a computer database that you can use to generate mailing labels—because direct mail is probably the single most cost-effective means by which to reach the few voters who will actually turn out. It’s important to remember that when getting lists from your district, you want the lists of people who turned out in a year when there was a contested election. In some years when school board elections are uncontested and the budget is not controversial, the turnout may be exceedingly low. Instead, you want the larger list of people who turn out when they know their vote is important.

You can now plan one or more mailings to the targeted voters to explain why you are running and why they should support you. Postcards are often the simplest, most effective, and least expensive way to communicate with the voters. A standard postcard can be mailed with first-class postage, or an oversized jumbo card (8.5” x 5.5”) can be mailed inexpensively if you can get a bulk mail permit. You may decide to use a letter format, so you can include more
information. I started with a letter for my first mailing and then switched to the large postcards. A letter in an envelope can also be bulk-mailed at reduced rates (but the permit will cost you $150).

As with all good print communication, you don’t want to overload the card or letter with too much information. Just give some basic background about who you are and why you are running. Remember you are trying to persuade the voter to support you. Whenever possible you want to make some kind of personal connection with the voter. Since even those people who vote in school elections don’t get too excited about the election until it draws fairly close, you need to consider the timing of your mailings carefully. If your race is hotly contested, you may need to get out early with an introductory piece—maybe as early as when you file your petitions in April. Otherwise, you may only need to send out one piece of mail a couple weeks before the election in mid-May.

In my case, with seven candidates in the race, I sent out two mailings to the targeted voters and another mailing to neighborhoods in which I thought I might be able to generate some additional new voters.

### Other Voter Contact Tools

I knew my race for the school board would be difficult. In fact, my own mother didn’t believe I could win. “They’ll never let you win,” she said, referring to the status quo that had so often been maintained in our community. So in addition to mailing letters and postcards to voters and potential voters, I asked friends and supporters to host small gatherings in their homes where I could meet their friends and neighbors. This gave people an opportunity to meet me and ask questions about why I was running, and it gave me a chance to connect with people and line up their support.
In addition, I also ran some broad-based efforts, because I knew this was a hotly contested race and I needed every vote I could possibly get. I ran newspaper ads. I organized a door-to-door leafletting campaign on the weekend before the election and again on the night before the election. And when one of my opponents starting running radio commercials the week before the election, I jumped right in and had a commercial on the air within a day.

Printing, postage, newspaper ads, radio commercials! Most school board campaigns do not require so many efforts that all require money, but some may. So, in addition to funding a significant part of the campaign myself, I actually raised funds from friends and community members. People were surprisingly willing to contribute, because we had a clearly defined purpose—improving our schools by changing the makeup of the board of education. People were angry about the decline of our schools, and they were frustrated with the school board’s lack of effective response to the situation.

On election night I outpolled all the other six candidates in the race and won one of the two open seats on the board.

**Okay: You’ve Won the Election. Now What Do You Do?**

The role of a school board member is often misunderstood. Too often, board members focus on what they know as former students or as parents:

- Do the buses run on time?
- Does the building look clean?
- How did the football team do?

Too often board members tend to micro-manage the school district:

- I don’t think we should hire that teacher.
- No, the day should start ten minutes later.
- My son should be the starting center for the basketball team.
The first three things represent items school board members could be concerned about, but are topics upon which they should not place their prime focus. The second three statements represent issues with which boards should rarely, if ever, be involved. These kinds of issues fall into the province of administrators and coaches.

What boards should be focusing on are things like setting the broad direction and the policies of the district. The board also should be responsible for overseeing the management of the district—not conducting the day-to-day management, but ensuring that the administrators are doing their jobs properly. The board should provide leadership in dealing with major educational issues and in helping create a culture of excellence in the district. Ultimately, the board should demand accountability for results—improvement in student achievement.

Some people who have considered running for a school board feel that they don’t know enough about education to do so. But as a school board member, you do not need to be an expert about the details of public education. The skills you need are in the areas of strategic direction and management oversight—not in buying books or planning curriculum. That's why you hire administrators and teachers. It helps to have some understanding of the broad issues and challenges facing public education, but that you can learn from school board conferences, from magazines and newspapers, and from interacting with your new colleagues on the board.

A variety of specific resources is available to help new board members. Most school districts in this state belong to the New York State School Boards Association, which runs training and orientation programs for new board members. Its School Board Institute, an eight-course leadership development series, is based on a text titled *The Key Work of School Boards*, highlighting the board's responsibility to be an independent voice. It is loaded with questions that boards should ask superintendents, and questions that
the board itself should be able answer. There are also numerous publications available from this state organization as well as the National School Boards Association. Many school boards provide their own orientation sessions for new members. And more and more school boards are engaging in regular board development efforts to give themselves the kind of professional training they need to be successful.

Sticking to Your Issues

While Learning to Work Together

In school districts that need to change the way they have been doing business, for board members who run and get elected on a platform of bringing about that change, life can be a bit tough at first. After all, you’re the new kid on the board. You’re the one who wants to upset the apple cart. “You don’t understand the way we do things around here.”

My first year or two on our board of education was just short of miserable at times. Some board members were quite skeptical and wary of me, to say the least—especially when I spoke out, because I don’t think new members were supposed to say much. Then, a few months into my term of office, I was invited to write two guest essays about problems in public education by the local newspaper. The editor insisted on including in the biographical information that accompanied the article the fact that I was a member of the city’s board of education. Well, the reaction of some of my colleagues on the school board was less than favorable. How dare I write an article and say that I represented the school board? “But, I didn’t say that,” I replied. I simply wrote two informative essays and it was mentioned in the articles that in addition to owning a business in the community, I served on the school board. To keep peace in the family, I agreed to let my colleagues know in advance if I was going to write any more articles.

The following year another member of our community group won a five-way contest for one of two open seats on our board. Two years later another member of our group would be elected, but in the meantime many of the concerns
of our community group began to receive attention as the board began a process that would truly change the dynamics and effectiveness of our organization.

**Focusing On Goals:**  
*The Necessity of Learning to Work Together*

At the end of my first year on the board, a retiring board member and I agreed on the need for the board to do some long-range planning and goal setting. Like most school boards ours had tended to react to situations at hand—often crises—rather than proactively leading the district. We had never done any long-range planning. Some superintendents may prefer things that way; if the board doesn’t have any long-term goals, then the superintendent doesn’t have to worry about achieving those goals. However, without a focus on broad issues and goals, school boards tend to micro-manage, simply because they need something to do. If boards would work on the broad policy issues and the goal-setting that are their real areas of responsibility, they would be far less likely to meddle in the day-to-day management of the district, a responsibility that properly rests with administrators.

Our board was lucky enough to acquire the services of a highly talented facilitator, Richard Castallo, who was brought in by our superintendent to help us with long-range planning. The superintendent had worked with this consultant while employed in another district, so there was a level of trust between the two individuals. Following good organizational consulting practice, our consultant quickly diagnosed that there were some serious interpersonal conflicts on our board. At the same time he began a process of focusing our energies on developing medium- and long-term goals that would help us eventually overcome many of our differences.
A pivotal event occurred when we decided to leave town for a weekend board retreat with our facilitator/consultant joining us. A number of hot-button issues happened to pop up just days before our scheduled retreat. And, of course, I was the one to fan the flames via e-mail to all board members just in time for us to go away together for the weekend. To make a long story short, many board members had their opportunity during this weekend to express their frustration, anger, and just plain annoyance with me. I had been a royal pain for some of these people. I had raised issues that the board had preferred not to address. I had pushed and prodded. After hours of discussion at the retreat, most, if not all the members finally agreed that I had been right to raise these hot-button issues, but they objected to the inflammatory way in which I had raised them. Finally, my colleague from our community group suggested that if I had raised the issues in any less inflammatory a manner; the board would have ignored them. Ultimately, my colleagues agreed that this is very well what might have happened.

While the weekend was a rough one for me (the consultant suggested the group thank me for letting them beat up on me for four hours one evening), it was possibly the best thing that could have happened to our board. Once my colleagues were able to dump out all that anger and frustration that had built up, then we were finally able to start focusing on what was best for the children. Then we were finally willing to admit, for example, that it was a mistake to have an unofficial board policy that we would never try to dismiss an incompetent, but tenured, teacher. We found a way to put the personal stuff aside and put our energies into our goals, which included developing a world-class school system. We opened up our internal communications system among board members—a system that had previously hampered board members from bringing up controversial issues. One member, who later became president of our board, suggested the creation of a simple form that board members could use to place issues of concern before the board for consideration. All of this was in marked contrast to the past practices of this board.
In some sense it seemed like a logjam had been broken. Many of the board members realized that some serious problems had been going unattended, but this board simply did not have a culture that allowed them to be active in attending to those kinds of problems. In some sense, people were relieved when we as a board could tackle some of the critical issues facing the district.

I think that those of my colleagues who remain on our board some five years later would agree that the relations and interactions among our board members became far more collegial and even cordial after that highly productive board retreat. The conclusion that I drew from this experience is that even a highly contentious board can find its way, with the right kind of skillful assistance, to become a productive and effective working body that puts the interests of children above all else.

The Drive Toward Improving Student Achievement

As a result of our long-range goal setting, our board decided to focus on improving student achievement, which to my mind is the first and foremost responsibility of any school board. Through a series of workshops with our consultant, we gradually came to adopt a goal of creating a world-class school system. Next, we turned to our administrative team to operationalize this broad goal and create some measurable and specific goals that would define world-class excellence. Focusing on mastery became a prime element in these goals. Another key element that the administrators incorporated into the goals was continuous improvement.

Over the past four years it has been exciting to watch the progress we’ve been making toward our academic goals. Some goals have been reached. For others we’re getting close; and some of our goals seem like they are still
years away. However, by focusing the energies of the dis-
trict on student achievement, we have started a process in
which all our administrators and most members of our fac-
ulty are realizing that results do matter. We are changing
the culture of our school community. People are concen-
trating on the important issues of curriculum and instruc-
tion. Many are working very hard, harder than they have
ever worked before. The word is out that if you apply for a
position in our district, you’ll really have to work—extra
days of staff development in the summer, careful analysis of
your students’ test results to identify weaknesses in cur-
riculum and instruction, quarterly meetings during the
year to improve the performance of your department, and
more.

Where did all of this change start? Where did the
emphasis on improving student achievement come from? It
came from leadership by school board members, people
volunteering their time to improve this most important of
public institutions, people leading to the schools we need.
Many educators bristle at the idea that schools can be run “like a business.” If you as a business person show up as a school-board member or in some other role helping the schools, they’ll want to get you to fit into their culture, rather than the other way around.

And the system is adept at taking over newcomers and making its priorities their priorities. One study shows that more than 80 percent of school board agenda items are set by the superintendent, rather than the board. Rather than providing proactive leadership for a district, many school boards simply react to problems and put out fires. School board members are followers, not leaders, in many districts.

But you’ll be undercutting your value to the education system if you yield to the pressure to “go native”—to lay aside business skills and ways of thinking just so you’ll fit in.

Obviously there are differences between a school system and a profit-making business. But your special contribution is to bring your business skills to the table and apply them to this new situation.

A Focus on the Customer

One of the quickest ways to improve public education is, in fact, to think like a business person and try to make it more customer-focused. When was the last time your school district conducted a survey of its customers? If it did do a survey, how long ago was it? Is the survey repeated on
a regular basis? What does your district do with the survey information? How much change occurs as a result of a survey?

The fact is that few school districts have a program in place to regularly survey their customers about the service they deliver. Even fewer districts use survey data to make substantial changes in the way they do business. School board members should therefore view themselves as the ultimate customer/consumer of public education—the “supercustomer.” School board members need to be constantly asking themselves if people should be happy with the operation of their schools. They also should ask themselves in the most objective and honest way: Should we accept the quality of our schools?

• **Action Step:** Ask your school district to survey its customers on a regular basis to determine the satisfaction of those customers. Make sure the surveys are conducted by a reputable firm that will assist the district with interpreting the data for the primary purpose of addressing problems in the district and improving student achievement.

Now that we have explored a few of the institutional barriers to achieving that excellence, it is time to look at what school board members need to know and do to build a culture of excellence in their school districts.

**Creating a Vision with High Expectations**

Just as with a business, once a school board member has a clear picture of the customers, the next step is a clear set of goals. The first step in creating a world-class school district requires that a school board create a world-class vision of what they want their district to be. One of the first hurdles many school boards will face is the retort from some who may say, “But we can’t become that good!” The answer should be, “And why not?”

New Yorkers live in a state of extraordinary affluence. No, not all school districts share equally in that wealth, but
we still have access to significant sums of money to fund our schools. Unfortunately, we don’t always spend the money we have in the most effective or efficient ways.

Money aside, the real problem is one of conviction and determination. Too many people and too many school board members are afraid to aim high. Remember, no one is saying that every school district can be the #1 district in the state or in the country. What districts should be saying is that they want to be at a level that is reached by thousands of quality schools throughout the developed world—a world-class level.

The first step in achieving such a standard of excellence is to create a vision that includes world-class academic excellence for your district. Most boards would be wise to seek outside assistance with the vision development task and the entire planning and monitoring process that is the core of this important change management effort. Talented facilitators from the university and corporate worlds are available to assist districts with this kind of work.

Once the idea of world-class excellence is accepted by your board, the vision needs to be captured in meaningful and measurable academic goals. What those goals should consist of is up to each board of education. However, the logical goal is for students to achieve mastery of the material they study, so goals focusing on getting high percentages of students to mastery would seem to be critical.

**Implementation: The Devil is in the Details**

Once a board has created a vision for a world-class school system and developed clear and measurable academic goals, an implementation plan is needed to turn those goals into reality. Here is where the administrative team needs to carry the ball. The implementation is the responsibility of management; the day-to-day management of schools is not the responsibility (nor is it the province) of school boards. The board’s responsibility is to oversee the implementation plan, provide a reality check to make sure the plan seems workable, and keep the administrative team on track by periodically reviewing the district’s progress toward the goals.
The board also has another very important role to play in this kind of change management effort. The board needs to ensure that the administrative team has the appropriate resources to successfully implement the plan. It simply isn’t reasonable for a board to ask its managers to achieve major improvements in academic performance without ensuring that a reasonable level of resources, deployed in the most appropriate ways, is available to the administrative team. To determine what kinds of resources are needed and at what levels, the board and its administrative team, perhaps working together with a consultant, can undertake a gap analysis and a needs assessment.

**Finding the Gaps**

As discussed above, the first step in improving schools is developing an understanding of where they are now. We have data about where schools stand at the state and national levels, but when working at the local level a district also needs to understand where its own schools stand.

The gap analysis examines the gaps between where your district is now (in terms of student achievement) and where you want it to be at some point down the road (the academic goals you have identified). For example, suppose the school district in the imaginary community of Milltown, New York determines that a part of world-class excellence means that 80 percent of its students should score at mastery or above on all Regents exams. Next, the Milltown school board takes a look at its current Regents results and finds that on average only 35 percent of its students reach mastery (a score of 85 or better on a Regents exam). In this case Milltown has identified a critical gap in student performance—moving from 35 percent of students scoring at mastery to the goal of 80 percent at mastery.

In actuality, there is much more that goes into a gap analysis, but this is where good change management consultants can help.

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**Create a vision that includes world-class academic excellence.**
The Needs Assessment

One way of looking at a needs assessment is as a tool for addressing the identified gaps in performance. The needs assessment looks at the identified gaps, prioritizes the gaps in the results, and focuses efforts on the most important gaps that need attention. Once the gaps—and the results needed to close those gaps—have been identified, the administrative team can begin the construction of an implementation plan to close the gaps. A central part of the plan will be to continue to look at needs, but in a more specific way. What actions will the district need to take to close the gaps? These can include changes in curriculum, in instruction, in staff development, in culture, in schedules, in staffing, in hiring practices, in budgets and allocations of resources, and in contracts with teachers and other staff members.

Here is where the rubber meets the road. Here is where the greatest challenges will be. Public schools, like many other institutions, tend to resist change, and there will be opposition to many of the changes your district will need to make if you want to accomplish anything more than modest, incremental improvement. While your administrative team is charged with carrying out the implementation plan and making the necessary program, budget, and personnel changes, your board of education must also play a leadership role. The board can clearly and firmly communicate to all the stakeholders in your school community and the community at large how important these changes are. Your board can set the tone, help change the culture, and fully support the administrative team as it goes about the difficult job of making your school district much more accountable for student performance.

Institutions tend to resist change.

Question Dogma

School boards must also constantly question the educational dogma of the day, including the accepted practices for curriculum and instruction. To paraphrase Lewis Thomas, school boards need to realize that much of the educational dogma that is used to run schools is nonsense. Too many things done in public education are not supported by good, hard science to validate their efficacy.

One of the most important areas in which teachers need far better training is in the teaching of reading. Many teachers and administrators fall prey to educational fads supported by poor research (if any). Indeed, it appears that much of the work in the field of educational research is of questionable quality. The good research that exists is sometimes ignored if it does not comport with the educational philosophy of the day—or more particularly the educational philosophy of the particular faculty that runs a specific teacher education program. Consequently, too many teachers wind up trained to use exciting-sounding approaches that at best have little research behind them, and at worst do real harm by failing to properly educate children. The most discouraging example of this tendency can be found in the teaching of reading.

There is probably more scientific research about the teaching of reading than there is about any other topic in education. In the mid-1990s the federal government decided to conduct a rigorous review of the reading research through a project conducted by the National Institute for Child Heath and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health. A major conclusion drawn by the expert panel convened for this review of the research, The National Reading Panel, was that systematic, explicit phonics instruction is a critically important part of any good reading program. Yet phonics is simply not acceptable in many schools, because it is not acceptable to the teachers who were trained to believe that phonics is unnecessary and certainly should not be emphasized.
Another large study was conducted by the federal government in the 1960s and 1970s. Studying close to 10,000 children, this research examined various teaching approaches. Of the nine models studied for teaching disadvantaged children, only one approach, Direct Instruction, was found to be consistently more effective than all the others. Unfortunately, for the children, the characteristics of Direct Instruction ran counter to the progressive educational fads of the day, and powerful groups within the educational establishment worked hard to discredit this very effective approach for teaching reading and other subjects.

The teachers’ unions have been vocal in recommending that schools and teachers use validated approaches to reading instruction. A report issued by the American Federation of Teachers in 1999 referred to the large new body of research available to schools and teachers. However, the report also pointed out one of the systemic barriers to making good use of that research in the classroom:

Few of today’s popular textbooks for teacher preparation in reading contain information about the known relationships between linguistic awareness, word recognition ability, and reading comprehension. Few discuss in any useful detail how the English writing system represents speech. Basic concepts such as the differences between speech sounds and spellings, the fact that every syllable in English is organized around a vowel sound, and the existence of meaningful units (morphemes) in the Latin layer of English (about 60 percent of running text) are rarely explained. Few texts contain accurate information about the role of phonology in reading development, and few explain with depth, accuracy, or clarity why many children have trouble learning to read or what to do about it. Teachers are often given inaccurate and misleading information based on unsupported ideas. 

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5 Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do, American Federation of Teachers, June 1999.
A recent review of major classroom reading programs shows that they continue to lack the content necessary to teach basic reading systematically and explicitly.\(^6\)

Remember, the National Reading Panel has also stated that systematic, explicit phonics is a critical component of any good reading program. Yet, according to Michael Brunner, former senior researcher in phonics at the National Institute of Education, the textbooks for training teachers to teach reading with systematic, explicit phonics have been out of print for 50 years.\(^7\)

Imagine your doctor refusing to use the latest research about cancer, just because he likes to practice medicine a different way. Well, if he’s your doctor, you have a choice. You can switch doctors and find yourself someone who keeps up with the scientific research in his or her profession. But most children don’t have that choice.

Reading is one example of an area in which school board members, businesses, and community members can make a real contribution by demanding that their school districts deliver instruction that is supported by rigorous scientific research—in this case the research coming out of the National Reading Panel. There are many other areas in which instruction that is of questionable validity is being delivered at public expense. School boards need to be vigilant about ensuring that best practices, those that are rigorously proven to be highly effective and efficient, are being utilized in their schools.

- **Action Step:** Ask your school district to report to the community about the alignment of the district’s instructional practices in reading with the research from The National Reading Panel and NICHD at the National Institutes of Health.

- **Action Step:** Ask to see a list of all the training that each of the elementary teachers in your district has had

\(^6\) Ibid, p. 13.

\(^7\) Michael Brunner, personal communication, November 1997
in providing “systematic, explicit phonics instruction” as recommended by the National Reading Panel at NIH.

- **Action Step:** Ask your school board to recruit only elementary teachers who have substantial training in providing “systematic, explicit phonics instruction” and who have advanced training in reading instruction as recommended by the National Reading Panel.

**Support and Results**

While your board must provide unflinching leadership and support for the difficult work your administrators will undertake, you must also hold your administrators accountable for real results. This is one of the most important responsibilities of school boards—and one they often overlook. Just because your administrators work with you to develop an implementation plan, and just because they actually implement the plan, that doesn’t mean they (and you) are off the hook if the plan does not achieve meaningful results.

If the school district is not demonstrating real progress toward the district’s goals as you move along a reasonable timeframe, then the board and your administrators need to understand that they may need to make changes in their plan. Administrators may need to work together with the board and a consultant to identify the barriers to success that keep the district from making real progress toward its goals. What you may find in such a case is that the problems confronting your district—problems that prevent children from learning as well as you would like—are far more intense and complex than you first estimated. Here is where adjustments in the deployment and application of resources may again come into play. Here is where your board may have to start asking very tough and direct questions about how every dollar in your budget is spent. Finally, here is where you may need to step back and look at the big picture by asking some fundamental questions:
• Do we have a culture of excellence that pervades every nook and cranny of our school district?

• If we don’t, how can we create it?

• Do all members of our school community—board members, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents—share a commitment to academic success and academic excellence?

• If they don’t, how can we address that?

• How do we make sure that everyone understands that success in school needs to be the #1 priority?

• Do we have the quality of leadership we need to reach our goals?

This last question should come last—not first. Too often school boards jump right to the idea that a lack of progress is the superintendent’s fault, and they decide to find another superintendent. That’s the easy way out, and often it provides no real solution. If the superintendent isn’t being successful in leading the district, then the board first needs to ask itself if it has done everything possible to provide the superintendent with the resources, the support, the training, and a reasonable amount of time in which to achieve real progress toward the district’s goals. The board also needs to find out if there are institutional barriers to change that the board can help overcome. Only after all these areas and questions have been explored, should a board question the need for a stronger leader.

• **Action Step:** Investigate the concept of performance-based contracts for all school administrators in your district. When a manager’s compensation is linked to the performance of his or her organization, there is a new incentive for managers to make the hard decisions that otherwise get ignored.

However, it must also be noted that many superintendents do not have the skills, the training, and the leadership ability to bring about fundamental change in a public school system. One key in evaluating the performance of a
superintendent is not whether he or she is being immediately successful, but whether they display an attitude that the job really can be done:

• Is the superintendent willing to work with a board to set high goals for academic achievement—to put him or herself on the line?

• Is the superintendent willing to go out and get the training and education he or she may need to get the job done?

• Is your district’s leader determined to find and mobilize the resources necessary to reach your goals?

While a superintendent may not always have all the resources at hand that he or she needs, the attitude and commitment that person displays toward getting the necessary resources is critical. The job of the school board in this area is twofold: You need to make sure you provide for the professional development of your superintendent—make sure that he or she has the skills and training necessary to move your district toward academic excellence. And you also need to hold your superintendent accountable for results. He or she needs to know that you take your district’s academic goals seriously.
Chapter 4

The People Factor

One basic way in which schools are just like business is that people are the key to the whole thing. Getting good people, motivating them, rewarding them, bringing out the best in them—every one of these things is just as important to the schools as to your business.

And for schools, as for businesses, the importance of “the people factor” starts at the top of the organization. New York State Commissioner of Education Richard Mills has noted that many of the schools that are achieving great improvements in student achievement are also schools that have great leadership. If a school district is really concerned about excellence, it needs to recruit and train top quality administrators, the best and the brightest that the profession has to offer. Great leaders can change the culture of their schools. They can focus the energies of the faculty and staff on the one thing that makes the most difference in student achievement: instruction.

Yet too often, school districts have not realized the importance of inspired leadership in their buildings. Administrators have often been underpaid for the breadth and complexity of their jobs. Not only is a principal expected to be the instructional leader in the building, but she or he often is also expected to handle the numerous social and discipline problems that plague far too many of today’s schools. These problems can require principals to spend considerable time working with social workers and psychologists as well as spending time in court dealing with very disruptive students. Add to that the voluminous amounts of paperwork, far too many state-mandated committees on
which principals must participate, and an expectation that the principal should show up at every athletic event and drama or music presentation. Now, we have created a job that in many school districts few qualified people want.

How did we arrive at this state of affairs? Schools have for too long taken on more and more of the problems facing society. From feeding hungry students to providing counseling and therapy to offering after-school care, the role of school has expanded far beyond the academic concerns for which the institution of public education was first developed. Who becomes responsible for coordinating and overseeing so many of these additional services? Why, the principal, of course.

In too many cases principals have become institutional managers rather than educational leaders. Many programs for training educational administrators focus on management—with little concern for instructional leadership. This helps create an imbalance between what we really need principals to do to improve student achievement, and what we require of them to keep their buildings functioning.

Can they effectively run fire drills, or make sure the cafeteria is properly staffed, or supervise the janitorial staff? In most cases the answer is “yes.” But do they spend more than a small fraction of their time in classrooms on a regular basis? Do they feel confident enough about subject material and instructional practices to focus their energies on ensuring that all the instruction in their buildings is highly effective and highly efficient? If the answers to those questions are “no,” then that is a significant barrier to making systemic improvements in public education.

The problems facing superintendents are at least as great as those facing principals. The vast majority of superintendents have worked their way up the educational career ladder to their current positions. But along the way they have become part of an educational culture in which “accountability” is often a dirty word. In efforts to keep
teachers’ unions from getting too upset with changes in the district, many superintendents are inclined to approach change at such a slow pace that little of value is ever accomplished. On the other hand superintendents in New York State also face very difficult state policies covering the employment of the people who work for them; for example, it is all but impossible to dismiss an incompetent or lazy teacher.

If school boards want to hire a higher caliber of school superintendent, they will need to pay a competitive salary. The difficulties and pressures associated with being a school superintendent, along with the increasing accountability for school district performance, make it clear how inadequate are the compensation packages offered by some, if not most districts. Here is where another $30,000-$50,000 invested in a superintendent’s position could yield a payback many times over in terms of increased organizational efficiency and effectiveness when a top-flight administrator is hired.

You and your fellow school board members are also a key part of the leadership in our consideration of “the people factor.” In the absence of significant knowledge about education or leadership skills, too often school boards tend to over-rely on school administrators. As noted above, often school board agenda items are set by the superintendent, rather than the board. School board members are followers, not leaders, in all too many school districts.

The Legislature should mandate professional training for school board members once they are elected to office. Education is a state responsibility that the Legislature has designated to local communities. The Legislature has the right to ensure that this responsibility is carried out by appropriately trained individuals.

The Faculty You Need

The teaching faculty is ultimately the key force that delivers education to your district’s students, and a key part of a school board member’s responsibilities is to make sure that the district is getting the best possible teachers, and making the most of their talents.
We would all like to be able to hire only the most highly qualified and well-trained teachers for our schools. Unfortunately, not only are severe shortages developing in certain parts of the state, but also in certain subject areas such as foreign languages, science, math, and special education among others. Even in areas for which no shortage has yet developed, the supply of high-quality candidates is often limited. Many veteran teachers are now refusing to accept student teachers in their classrooms, because they are so disappointed with the preparation these teacher candidates bring to the classroom.

School boards need to take a much more aggressive role in demanding that only highly qualified teachers be hired for their districts. School boards in New York State may have to start recruiting much more aggressively out-of-state as they look for the best and brightest candidates from across the country.

Unfortunately, teaching does not always attract the most able or most scholarly individuals. While there are wonderfully talented and well-educated people who decide to go into teaching, this is not necessarily the norm. Perceptions about low salaries and low prestige, combined with the difficult atmosphere that exists in many schools, are just a few of the impediments to attracting the best and the brightest into this profession. Some researchers have suggested that as a group, those individuals who choose careers in teaching are among the least academically able people in colleges and universities. For example, thousands of teachers working in New York State under a temporary license are unable to obtain teacher certification because they cannot pass a relatively easy state examination. Some candidates have taken the exam numerous times and still cannot achieve a passing score. Other teachers who have graduated from teacher colleges, passed the appropriate state examinations, and received their permanent certification in New York State, are inadequately educated to serve as
teachers. Some are unable to write well, yet are charged with teaching students to learn to write well. Some have inadequate knowledge in their subject areas. Some elementary teachers, who are required to teach science and math, have little meaningful preparation in these areas and far too little command of the disciplines themselves.

How could such a state of affairs have developed? The past 40 years have brought about critical changes in the demographics of education. Up until the last third of the 20th Century, there were limited career options for women who chose to pursue a career outside the home. The traditional options were teaching and nursing. The women's movement changed all of that. Now, with almost limitless career options, the brightest women no longer have to choose between nursing or teaching, as they once did.

While the academic achievement of people who choose to enter teacher preparation programs is often weak, the quality of teacher preparation programs is notoriously uneven, and downright poor at some institutions. Some have suggested that 50 percent or more of teacher education programs in America are so substandard that they need to be radically improved or closed. During the next few years all teacher education programs in New York State will have to become accredited. Yet real questions still exist about the quality of the potential accrediting programs and how rigorously programs will be evaluated.

If the Commissioner of Education and the Board of Regents are serious about improving teacher quality, they must ensure that weak teacher education programs dramatically improve or close. The Regents should also consider matching the output of teacher candidates to market needs in both geographic and subject areas. For example, some teacher education programs that are producing too many graduates with certification to teach social studies (for which there are few shortages) should shift resources to train more math and science teachers (for which there are many shortages). The Legislature could offer economic incentives to draw students into subject areas and communities with the greatest shortages.
• **Action Step:** School boards must create powerful new recruitment strategies to find the best teachers. These might include competitive salaries (for which increased state aid will be necessary in some districts); career ladders for professional advancement; fully funded sabbaticals at regular intervals to allow teachers to renew themselves and avoid getting stale in the classroom; and powerful communications vehicles that tout all the advantages of teaching in the district—including the high expectations the district sets for student achievement, the district commitment to professional development, etc.

And the “pitch” you make to attract high-quality teachers must be real. There must be a culture of excellence and high achievement, to create a place the best teachers want to be.

**Compensation Issues**

Many will argue that teaching is not a full-time job, with teachers receiving numerous vacations during the school year and another ten weeks off during the summer. Certainly, teaching salaries have improved significantly in this state during the last generation with the growth of teacher unions and their vigorous bargaining with school districts. Yet, why is teaching not a more attractive profession for talented individuals?

Let’s look at where the shortages are the greatest—in our urban centers. The starting teaching salary (2001) in New York City was $31,900. This is within a few hundred dollars of the starting salary in the small upstate city of Glens Falls. Yet the cost of living in New York City was more than 126 percent greater than in Glens Falls. A starting salary of $31,000 in Glens Falls, adjusted for cost of living, would be over $70,000 in New York City. If Glens Falls is having trouble attracting enough highly qualified teachers, it’s easy to imagine how New York City isn’t even in the ballgame with such low starting salaries. In many communities uncompetitive compensation is a real barrier to
attracting highly capable people into the classroom. Uncompetitive salaries are a particular problem when it comes to attracting teachers in the math and science areas, since individuals with backgrounds in these subjects can earn substantially more in the private sector.

- **Action Step:** School districts need to increase compensation for entry-level teachers.

- **Action Step:** Districts need to abandon the single salary schedule and move to differentiated salary schedules that allow districts to offer higher salaries for hard-to-fill positions in shortage areas. Compensation for teachers should also be based upon performance rather than longevity in the classroom. Outstanding teachers should be properly rewarded, while economic disincentives should be put in place for teachers who do not achieve results or put forth strong effort.

**Lack of Career Opportunities**

One of the significant frustrations in the teaching profession is the lack of opportunity for career advancement. Unless a teacher is willing to leave the classroom for the role of an administrator, there are few options for teachers who are motivated to find new challenges and keep growing professionally. This lack of opportunity for career development contributes to teachers becoming stagnant and burned-out. It also means that most teachers are stuck on the same salary schedule that compensates all their colleagues regardless of how much effort and time each teacher in the school district puts forth.

- **Action Step:** School districts need to develop career ladders with new positions such as teacher mentors, master teachers, and supervising teachers. School districts can provide increased compensation for those teachers who choose to pursue more responsibility and supervisory teaching positions.
Working Conditions

In the 1999-2000 school year the New York City Board of Education, with the cooperation of the city and the United Federation of Teachers, instituted a plan to offer master teachers the option of receiving a 15 percent bonus if they would teach in one of the city’s lowest-performing schools. While approximately 11,000 teachers were qualified to apply for this program, only about 500 chose to participate. It turns out that salary is not the only barrier to bringing good teachers into the schools that really need them. All sorts of other work environment issues exist, including: lack of safe parking; poor physical conditions in buildings; weak leadership; lack of resources including textbooks, chalk, and computers; and many other working condition issues that provide disincentives for teachers to choose these schools and to excel in them.

In regard to the environment in which students and teachers must work, one estimate suggests that at least $6 billion is needed just to fix the school buildings that are in disrepair throughout the state.

Business persons have to deal with these kinds of worker satisfaction issues all the time; they can bring the same skills and the same attitude to the work of school boards.

What would it take to get good teachers to willingly teach in the schools with the most problems, the poorest building conditions, and the weakest leadership? Would it take a 30 percent premium, 50 percent, 75 percent? What if even a 100 percent premium was offered and large numbers of teachers still wouldn’t participate? What does that say about the viability of these poorest performing schools?

Let’s go back to the small city of Glens Falls. For many people this community offers an almost idyllic setting: small neighborhood schools to which children can walk, a moderate-size high school with a large offering of AP courses, and a community that regularly supports its schools when passing annual school budgets by wide margins. Yet, even here there are teachers who can’t wait to retire,
because the environment for teaching has become more difficult. In communities like Glens Falls, it’s not the buildings or the lack of resources that frustrate teachers. In many communities like this teachers are ready to quit as soon as they can, because the atmosphere for teaching has changed.

Too little support from parents, too much control by administrators, too many discipline problems, too many tests, and simply too many responsibilities! Teachers feel that they are no longer allowed simply to teach. In far too many instances, the teacher must also act as counselor, parent, drug educator, sexual abuse educator, and more.

And teachers are the ones who most often get saddled with numerous new responsibilities for which they often receive inadequate training—and for which they have too little time. Children are pulled out of class for physical therapy, for occupational therapy, for remedial instruction, for gifted and talented instruction, for music lessons, for this and that, and pretty soon an elementary teacher is lucky to ever have her or his entire class together for an entire day. At the same time the student population has changed. Our public schools serve more children with attention deficit disorder and other learning disabilities, with emotional disabilities, and with abusive home situations.

**Focusing on Effectiveness and Efficiency**

A concept known as the education production function has typically focused on the inputs and the outputs in schools. Historically, much of the analysis of public schools focused on the inputs: How many books, how many teachers, how much money, etc. did we invest in a school? By the 1990s the focus began shifting to an examination of the outputs: What are we getting for all this investment? The development of New York State’s School Report Card was one step in the process of examining how much bang taxpayers are getting for their buck.

Unfortunately, there has been far too little analysis of what happens between the inputs and the outputs. As one educational economist described it, when a teacher closes
the door to her classroom, nobody knows what goes on. Nobody knows how the educational inputs are being transformed into outputs.

One teacher may be very effective in using the various resources she has at her disposal to achieve the desired outcome: a large number of her students mastering the material she has taught. Another teacher right across the hall teaching the very same material with equivalent resources and an equivalent makeup of students may achieve significantly weaker results. The difference in achievement of the two classes may most logically be attributed to the nature of the instruction provided by the two teachers. One teacher may be using a very strong set of skills and validated instructional practices, while the other teacher may be lacking in skills, in subject area knowledge, and in classroom management techniques.

The problem is that often nobody is responsible for ensuring that comparably high levels of quality instruction are taking place in both classrooms. Neither fellow teachers nor most administrators are keen about suggesting to the weaker teacher that he really needs to make major improvements in his instruction. Even if anyone was inclined to provide such useful advice, it simply can't happen if there is rarely anyone in the class observing the deficiencies in the teacher's instructional approach.

How can schools be held accountable for their performance with such a state of affairs? How can schools be held accountable for ensuring that instruction is delivered both effectively and efficiently?

Many principals and other administrators may protest and argue that all teachers are observed on a yearly basis, and that those administrators who make the observations do in fact provide feedback to the teachers. But there are a few problems with such a response. First, administrators are not necessarily trained as experts at instruction. They may not have sufficient experience supervising teachers to make high-quality observations that are useful for more
than a handful of teachers. Second, many administrators are reluctant to criticize tenured faculty members for fear of upsetting the atmosphere of the building.

The notion of instructional leadership and supervision in schools looks great on paper, but it simply doesn’t always work well. If it did, our schools would be improving at a much faster rate. That’s a real challenge for school-board members.

**The Tenure Trap**

A school board’s effort to impact the quality of what’s happening in the classroom is further hampered by the virtual impossibility of removing a chronically under-performing teacher.

Originally developed to prevent inappropriate dismissal of teachers by vindictive or nepotistic school boards, teacher tenure as it exists today puts undue, if not impossible, burdens upon school districts in dealing with incompetent teachers. The problem is not with the concept of tenure itself. Rather, it is with Section 3020-a of New York State’s Education Law, which specifies the process by which a school district can dismiss a tenured teacher. Contrary to what some in the profession will argue, incompetent teachers cannot, for all intents and purposes, be dismissed under Section 3020-a. Section 3020-a is only useful when dismissing teachers for grossly inappropriate behavior, such as criminal activity. As a result of the extremely onerous burdens put on school districts for 3020-a proceedings, it can cost a school district $100,000 or more to pursue this course of action.

Although an incompetent teacher can theoretically be dismissed under the current law, the absence of a clear definition of competency in the profession makes the law unworkable. The simple fact that incompetent teachers do not get dismissed through 3020-a proceedings shows that, in fact, the law does not provide school districts with the ability to remove incompetent tenured teachers. The bottom line is that it can’t be done.

Without an ability to control the quality of his or her
staff, how can a principal really be held accountable for the performance of that staff? How can a superintendent be held responsible? For that matter, how can a school board be held responsible? Changes in Section 3020-a of the Education Law need to be addressed by the Legislature, in my opinion.

Parents, The ‘Friendly Enemy’

The ultimate power in public education rests with parents and other community members who, with their votes, control the makeup of school boards and the approval of budgets in most communities throughout the state.

Yet parents are sometimes non grata when it comes to asking questions about the actual operation of the schools they fund with their tax dollars. When schools ask their parents to become more involved, they often mean in terms of making something for the bake sale or supporting the soccer team. When parents begin raising questions about curriculum or instruction, then up go the walls of professionalism. “Leave those topics to us—we’re the professionals.”

Well, given the documented problems in our public education system, the “professionals” running them must not be perfect. There is a role for outsiders, and particularly parents, to play. The schools need scrutiny and pressure from their customers if they are to improve.

Ultimately, parents and taxpayers need to become better informed about the dubious fads that dominate public education. They also need to elect school board members who will be willing to challenge the educational establishment about unsupported instructional approaches that are used in place of highly validated practices, which have undergone rigorous scientific evaluation.
Issues Beyond the District

As you work on issues in your own school district, your attention inevitably will be drawn to issues beyond the borders—the impacts of professional practice, state policy, and other factors have on your ability to get the best performance from your own local schools. I'll conclude this handbook with a few observations about some of these factors.

An Ill-Prepared Profession

Perhaps the largest and most serious concern is that in many important ways, the education “profession” isn’t. Both teachers and administrators receive academic preparation that is often inadequate or even counter-productive. And in their work they can be swept along by fads, by research that is unsubstantiated and unscientific, and by a group mentality that can be resistant to (rather than eager for) constructive change—in all respects, the very opposite of what we think of, when we think of the best professions.

Teaching has often been viewed by many as a relatively easy and uncomplicated endeavor. After all, look at how society respects and rewards teachers. When was the last time you heard someone at a cocktail party boast, “My son is becoming a teacher.”

Why is the profession not held in high esteem? For one thing the entrance requirements to teacher education pro-
grams are so low that these programs often become havens for the least academically able students in higher education. Students who choose to enter teacher education programs, as a group, have the lowest SAT scores when compared with students who choose other professions. One consequence is that the academic quality of teacher education programs is often quite low and often less than scholarly. This makes it harder to imbue the entire profession of teaching with high levels of rigor or scholarship.

Dr. Douglas Carnine, the director of the National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators, has explored the nature of the education profession. In the following excerpt, he discusses the need for education to become a mature profession.

For the most part, education is in an immature state. Curriculum specialists routinely make decisions in a subjective fashion, eschewing quantitative measures and ignoring research findings. The influence of these “experts” affects all the players in the education world. Below is a description that could very well describe the field of education:

The history of the profession has never been a particularly attractive subject. . . . For century after century, all the way into the remote millennia of its origins, [the profession] got along by sheer guesswork and the crudest sort of empiricism. It is hard to conceive of a less scientific enterprise among human endeavors. Virtually anything that could be thought up for treatment was tried out at one time or another, and, once tried, lasted decades or even centuries before being given up. It was, in retrospect, the most frivolous and irresponsible kind of human experimentation, based on nothing but trial and error, and usually resulting in precisely that sequence.

The above quote does not describe education, but was written about medicine. Medicine has matured. Education has not. The excerpt, from a
book by the late Dr. Lewis Thomas, former president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, continues:

Bleeding, purging, cupping, the administration of infusions of every known plant, solutions of every known metal, most of these based on the weirdest imaginings about the cause of disease, concocted out of nothing but thin air—this was the heritage of medicine up until a little over a century ago. It is astounding that the profession survived so long, and got away with so much with so little outcry. Almost everyone seems to have been taken in. The real revolution in medicine did not begin with the introduction of science into medicine. That came years later. Like a good many revolutions, this one began with the destruction of dogma. It was discovered, sometime in the 1830s, that the greater part of medicine was nonsense.

Education has not yet gone through the metamorphosis from an immature to a mature profession. It seems that invariably, outside pressure, usually intense and sustained, is needed for a profession to go through the metamorphosis needed to become a mature profession. It is critical to note that dogma does not destroy itself nor does the profession of its own volition drive out dogma.

The metamorphosis is often triggered by a catalyst. Catalysts are pressures from groups that are adversely affected by the poor quality of service provided by a profession. The public’s abhorrence of the Titanic’s sinking served as a catalyst for a metamorphosis of seafaring. In the early 1900s, sea captains could sail pretty much where they pleased, and safety was not a priority. The 1913 International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea, convened after the sinking of the Titanic, quickly made rules that are still models for good practice in seafaring.
The post-metamorphosis status of a mature profession is characterized by the use of methods for determining efficacy:

1. A shift from judgments of individual experts to judgments constrained by quantified data that can be inspected by a broad audience

2. Less emphasis on personal trust and more emphasis on objectivity

3. Diminished autonomy by experts and a greater role for standardized measures and procedures informed by scientific investigations that use control groups.

The push for methods for determining efficacy, qualification, objectivity, and standardization has been greatest in political democracies, where various groups are able to promote their own welfare. Groups exert pressure when their welfare is threatened or harmed or when there is distrust between groups. For example, Alan Williams (cited in Porter, p. 101) described policy makers in Britain as authoritarian and paternalistic in assuming they knew what is best for society. A catalyst that diminished their authority came during World War I when Britain attempted to impose wage and price controls. Distrust between unions and corporations forced policy makers to adopt cost accounting, which was more objective, quantitative, and standardized.

Another example comes from pharmacology in the early 1900s. Unreliable drugs from pharmacists resulted in public pressures for standardization.

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We must turn teaching into a mature profession.

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A maverick who ushered in standardization was Paul Ehrlich, who found that the diphtheria antitoxin could be maintained in a dry state, which allowed for the standardization of dosages (p. 31).

External pressure seems not to merely accompany the metamorphosis of a profession but to be an absolutely essential ingredient. A profession will not mature without external pressure and the attendant conflict.8

Where will the pressure come from, to turn teaching into a mature profession? Who will pressure teacher-training institutions to fundamentally improve their programs? Could the customers of public education play a role in creating such pressures? Could the parents, businesses, and other taxpayers play a role in bringing about some of the critical pressure needed for institutional change?

What about school boards? As the representatives of the community, school boards can provide some of the external pressure that is needed. However, the average school board member needs to become far better educated him- or herself to understand why and how such a weak supply of teachers (and administrators) is being offered for hire to school districts.

**The Role of the State**

Since the provision of public education is a state responsibility under New York’s Constitution, it makes sense to look to the legislative and executive branches when it comes to finding systemic solutions for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the state’s public schools.

One of the most significant problems that both the Legislature and the governor have yet to address is the question surrounding the purpose of public education. As discussed earlier we have allowed public schools to become responsible for solving so many of the non-educational problems of modern society. By taking a system designed
more than 100 years ago for the specific purpose of teaching academics, and then incrementally changing its mission to include many more responsibilities without significantly changing the structure of the institution, we have adversely affected both the efficiency and effectiveness of that institution. Simply put, we have been piling extra baggage on the system for at least 50 years now—asking it to undertake functions for which it was never designed.

The time has come to rethink this public policy decision. There is a reasonable chance that society could find far more efficient and effective ways to provide the necessary non-academic services that schools are now being asked to deliver. By removing those responsibilities from schools, schools could then better focus on their primary mission of educating children.

Interestingly, many European countries already have a more focused approach to academics in their public schools. For instance, schools in many Western countries do not have responsibilities for providing meals, for transporting students to and from school, or for running athletic programs. Without these responsibilities, European countries can better focus their educational dollars on academic development. New York State should undertake a re-examination of what services its schools should provide and how limited educational dollars can be better focused upon academic achievement.

**The Status Quo**

The fact is, every step of the way you will find it hard to challenge the status quo in public education. A number of factors contribute to this situation. Being a monopoly without significant competition from other providers in many parts of the state, public schools have limited incentives to make major changes to improve their effectiveness. If a particular school, or a particular teacher protected by lifetime tenure, fails to meet the needs of customers, there are
few consequences. A teacher can’t be fired, and a school won’t be closed unless its results become horrendous. Where does that leave us? It leaves us with a system that is free to perpetuate mediocrity. We offer public educators very little reward for taking a risk to try fundamentally more effective approaches that would provide much greater success for children. Monopolies and tenure are two powerful forces that maintain the status quo and inhibit large-scale change. Few other members of society have guaranteed jobs for life.

**Organizing Parent Power**

While teacher unions exert influence in Albany to maintain the status quo, there is another group that could easily exert even more power with legislative leaders and the governor: the customers of public education—parents and businesses.

- **Action Step:** Concerned parents, taxpayers, and business leaders should unite to demand higher effectiveness, better efficiency, and more accountability from the state's public schools. Such grassroots efforts could carefully leveraged their efforts to bring about fundamental changes in state laws governing tenure, the training of teachers and administrators, and the operation of schools.

An effective organization of public education’s “customers” could help educate the public (as well as educators) about fads versus truly effective educational practices. It could showcase highly successful schools and school districts from around the state and help parents ask tough questions in their own communities about why such successful practices were not being used for their own schools.

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*We need an effective organization of public education’s ‘customers.’*
The creation and development of such a citizen organization is more than feasible. It could unite countless concerned parents, business leaders, and educators who are tired of seeing billions of dollars wasted on unproven fads and poor instruction. It could shine the light on poor leadership in schools and school districts. It could lobby the Legislature to release school districts from state mandates that do nothing to improve student achievement—mandates like an 1100 page curriculum for teaching about the potato famine in Ireland, or a mandate that all students be taught about Arbor Day.

Ultimately, our schools can be fixed. But that can only happen when people who share a common-sense approach to public education band together—in local communities, most importantly, and at the state level as well—to overcome the inertia that dominates this most important institution in our community life.
Leadership for the Schools We Need

A handbook for business people who want to make a difference on school boards

Increasingly, business leaders are aware that the quality of our education system is the key to the future success—or failure—of our economy. And business has been active in the policy debates over education reform at both the national and state levels.

But remember what the late House Speaker Tip O'Neill said: “All politics is local.” The same is true of schools. The place where policy is translated into action is right down the street, at your local school. And in New York and many other states, business people will find they have the most leverage in the place where the local decisions get made—and that's on the local school board.

This is a handbook for business people who are willing to step up, serve on school boards, and lead the drive for excellence. Based on one business owner's hard-earned experience, it tells you how you can put your business skills to good use in this important arena.

Todd Feigenbaum is a business owner, education policy analyst, and school board member in Glens Falls, New York. He is a member of the Education Committee of The Business Council of New York State, Inc. He chairs the Tech Valley North Committee of the Warren County Economic Development Corporation and serves as public representative on the New York State Professional Standards and Practices Board for Teaching. He is certified as a school business administrator and holds a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and Policy Studies from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

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