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AFT Teachers

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Baltimore, Maryland: Labor-Management Partnership at Work

Overview

News about the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) is positive these days. Elementary school test scores are up for the fourth year in a row—on both a national test and a state exam. The local newspaper has good things to say about the district, for a change, as do the union, the CEO, and the state superintendent. Baltimore City still has a long way to go in terms of raising student performance, but its initial school reform efforts are showing positive results.

Change began in 1997, with a new city/state partnership, the adoption of a master plan for improving the system, increased state funding, and labor-management teamwork.

This case study profiles how management and labor worked together, under intense state pressure, to turn around the district's schools.

District's Reform Context

Reform in Baltimore occurs within a larger context that involves the state's reconstitution policy, which began in 1994; the dis-

trict's reform began several years later, as this state policy began to take hold. State reconstitution has effected the Baltimore City Public School System far more than any other district in Maryland and has drawn national attention to an alarming trend of low performance throughout the district. Since 1995, nearly half of the district's schools have been threatened with state takeover, with some 83 schools currently on the state's reconstitution "watch list" due to low performance on state tests.¹

Moreover, the district was having legal problems as well. In the mid-1990s, both the

¹The number of schools on the state's reconstitution "watch list" grew from 40 in 1995 to 83 in 2002.

Demographics and Statistics

In 2001, the Baltimore City Public School System enrolled 95,875 students across 173 schools. Eighty-eight percent of these students are African-American and 10 percent are white. Approximately two-thirds are eligible for the free- or reduced-price lunch program; 35 percent receive Title I services; and 20 percent are enrolled in special education classes. BCPSS employs more than 12,000 employees (approximately 8,000 teachers), and its operating budget is nearly \$885 million.

district and state had been named as defendants in three lawsuits—one that concerned Baltimore’s provisions for special-needs students and two that concerned the funding adequacy of K-12 education. Tempted to simply funnel more money to Baltimore to resolve all three cases, the state was reluctant to do so until BCPSS changed its governance structure. State officials believed that a governance change also would be a first step toward addressing the fundamental problems within the system, at the forefront of which was its dismal student performance record.

The district’s predicament drew concern from labor and management alike. With 83 percent of the state’s worst-performing schools located in BCPSS, mounting legal battles and a history of labor-management strife, substantial change was clearly needed.

To help the district toward this end, in 1997, the Maryland State Legislature adopted a law creating a “partnership” between the state, city and BCPSS, resulting in a new Board of Commissioners to run the district. Four board members were chosen by the governor, four were chosen by Baltimore’s mayor, and all required approval by the State Commissioner of Education.² The new board was to designate a chief executive officer (CEO), who in turn would select academic and financial directors for the district. The board also was charged to work with the union and create a five-year master plan for the district, which required State Board of Education approval. The plan was to address professional development and curriculum and to set forth a specific course of action for the city’s lowest-performing schools. In addition, the state required the district to equalize its salary structure and include a student performance element in its teacher evaluation system. In return, BCPSS received enough funding from the state to settle the pending lawsuits—boosting state aid to the district by more than \$250 million over five years.

² This board also consists of one non-voting student member.

Within this context, serious school reform began in the Baltimore City Public School System in 1997.

Steps toward Reform

Developing a Master Plan for Reform

The district’s new Board of Commissioners first created the Master Plan for the Baltimore City Public School System in 1997, and continues to revise it annually to reflect district growth and evolving needs. The plan addresses improving school management, raising standards, and revamping professional development for teachers. Its goals are to raise student performance across the board and to intervene in and differentially support those schools that are most lagging behind.

Focusing on Literacy To Boost Performance Districtwide

As the Board of Commissioners developed the master plan, it studied ways to improve the performance of all district students. For elementary schools, the board embraced a literacy focus in order to create a solid foundation for student achievement across the district. The goal was to focus the district’s hodgepodge of reading programs into one or two research-based approaches in which teachers would be trained and to which time and other resources would be dedicated. This literacy focus formed the basis upon which all improvements in the district were rooted. Professional development was a key part of this plan, with all elementary teachers getting trained in the reading approaches and each school receiving a reading coach to assist teachers with classroom practice on an ongoing basis.

In consultation with the union, the Board of Commissioners adopted for the 1998-1999 school year the Open Court reading program for early elementary grades and the Houghton-Mifflin program for upper elementary grades. All elementary school teachers were trained in the new programs before the school year began; this training was mandatory, and teachers were paid to attend. Because Baltimore’s intradistrict

mobility rates were high, the district hoped that the new phonics-based program would provide consistency for students who moved from school-to-school within the district. Based on suggestions from union representatives, the district also adjusted existing student transfer policies so that students who changed their residence during the school year could remain in their originating school through the end of the school year, if they and their parents so chose.

Targeting the Lowest-Performing Schools for Improvement

In addition to focusing on performance overall, the district's plan directed attention toward the lowest-performing schools that had shown the greatest need of assistance. Like many large districts, Baltimore's schools were organized into subdistrict clusters, organized by grade level, and each school reported to one of several administrative superintendents. In 1998, however, BCPSS removed its 33 lowest-performing elementary and K-8 schools from their reporting areas, asking each of them to adopt a model reform program in consultation with faculty. School teams were given the choice of adopting either the Direct Instruction program immediately or taking a year to choose among other research-based reform models. Eighteen schools adopted the Direct Instruction program in 1998-1999; this group of schools became known as the *Direct Instruction Area* within BCPSS. A year later, 13 more schools adopted Achievement First and two chose Success for All (SFA), with implementation beginning in the 1999-2000 school year; this group became known as the *Central Area* within BCPSS.

Bringing in a New Superintendent as CEO

In 2000, the board hired a new superintendent, Carmen Russo, as the district's chief executive officer. She had experience managing change as associate superintendent in Broward County, Fla. and as chief executive of New York City's high school district. Importantly, she knew that unions were criti-

cal players in the reform process. Russo routinely included the union in key decisions about reform and teacher needs in the district. As a result, the union was able to work out specific contract adjustments (described below) regarding training, work rules and transfer policies necessary for effective reform.

Handling Reconstitution When It Hit

The district's reform plan had not been in place long enough to save several district schools from state reconstitution. In 2000, shortly before the new CEO came to the district, the state took over three Baltimore schools on the reconstitution "watch list," mandating that BCPSS turn over these schools to a private company. After a bidding process, Edison won the contract to manage them. Accordingly, all three schools were removed from the control of the BCPSS system—a deal whereby Edison would set staffing levels in these schools and would hire, assign, evaluate and pay teachers as it saw appropriate.

In 2001, the state threatened to reconstitute a fourth school, *Westport Elementary and Middle School*. The State Board of Education assumed that Edison would manage this school in addition to the other three, outside of the purview of the district, but the new superintendent suggested an alternative. She proposed that a different private company be allowed to run Westport and that, unlike the other three reconstituted schools, Westport remain a part of the BCPSS jurisdiction. The state agreed, and approved the superintendent's selection of Victory Schools as the private managing company.

Keeping the school within the district opened doors for the union, district and Victory Schools to negotiate an extension to the BCPSS contract, setting out some different working conditions for teachers at this site. The agreement stipulated that Westport teachers would work longer school days and a longer school year than their counterparts in other schools, for which they would receive compensation and transfer of employment rights. Part of the increased

time in the summer and during the school year was dedicated to professional development.

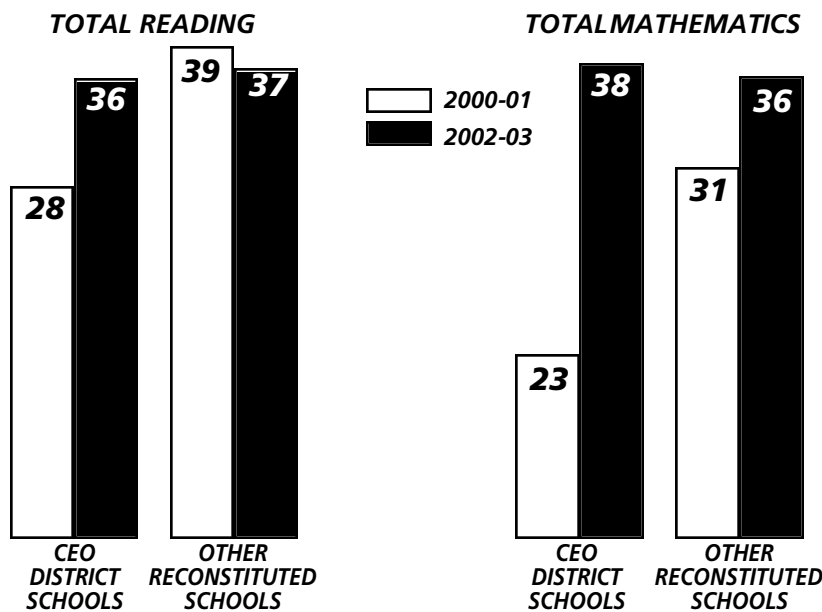
Reaching Out to Other Low-Performing Schools and Negotiating New Contract Provisions

At about the same time that this agreement was reached with Westport, the district proactively identified 10 additional low-performing schools, pulling them out of their regular geographic reporting areas and forming a third sub-group within BCPSS called the *CEO District*. The union negotiated an agreement similar to the one previously created with Westport, whereby teachers in these schools would receive compensation for working extended school days and an extended school year, transfer and employment rights, and access to additional professional development activities. The agreement also called for the district to hire certified teachers in these schools before filling vacancies in other schools. These schools continue to use the Open Court and Houghton Mifflin reading programs; in addition,

they adopted Achievement First, a program that emphasizes coaching and professional development.

One unique feature of this contract agreement—which the union later went back and added to the Westport and Victory Schools agreements—was a performance bonus for teachers and paraprofessionals in these 10 schools that formed the CEO District. The agreement stipulated that teachers in these schools whose students made schoolwide progress toward reaching the state average on the Maryland assessment—where progress was defined as moving one-third of the way from baseline performance at the time of reconstitution to the state average—would receive a bonus. The bonus was worth one step on the salary schedule, or 2 percent if they were already at the top of the schedule, which teachers and paraprofessionals would keep as long as they stayed in the district. To date, two schools have earned this bonus, which is noteworthy in most any situation but is particularly impressive given that most of these schools started out with only 15 percent of students able to pass the Maryland state assessment.

Median National Percentile Rankings on the TerraNova Total Reading and Total Mathematics for 2000-01 through 2002-03



Results

Mean test scores have increased across the system. For the first time in two decades, the majority of second and third graders scored above the national average on standardized tests, including the California Test of Basic Skills. Also, BCPSS was the only district in the state that posted improvements across the board on the Maryland state assessment. Moreover, two BCPSS schools have been removed from the reconstitution-eligible list. In addition, the CEO District schools increased their median percentile rankings on the TerraNova in three years, moving from the 28th percentile to the 36th percentile in reading and from the 23rd percentile to the 38th percentile in math. These schools exceeded the other reconstituted

schools in math and were nearly even with other reconstituted schools in reading, but in both subjects the overall gains made by the CEO District schools surpassed the other reconstituted schools.

Westat, a private evaluation firm contracted to assess the system's improvements under the state partnership, noted in its fall 2001 report that the system has "tremendously improved." This evaluation credited BCPSS for raising test scores, especially in elementary schools; the adoption of citywide curricula and expanded learning opportunities, such as summer school and after-school programs; and advances in governance, such as a clearly articulated and unified master plan.

Implications and Challenges

The road to reform is always rocky, in part because it involves so many players who often have diverging interests. In Baltimore, labor and management's common understanding that school improvement efforts

were to raise chronically low student achievement served to enable both parties to work together in developing a more effective system, both for students in this district and the professionals who teach them.

Through it all, the district developed a strong focus on literacy, determination to hire fully licensed teachers, commitment to provide professional development, commitment to select research-based school reform strategies, and understanding the use of data to drive instruction. In addition, the district continues to provide professional development to teachers on adapting teaching strategies to student results. These things happened in spite of the frequent changes in the district—leadership turnover, re-composition of the school board and modifications in organizational structure—and under the microscope of the State Board of Education and a media determined to expose system failures. Indeed, in the midst of leadership changes in the district, the AFT provided important stability for BCPSS teachers. Further, this case illustrates how sometimes an outside organization—in this case, the state—is necessary to catalyze change.



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