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Contracted Providers:

Overcoming Challenges in a Portfolio School District

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Author Jackqueline N. Miller, Ed.D is an educational consultant. Her doctoral dissertation, "Perceptions of University Faculty, Administrators, and Staff Engaged in the Shared Governance of University-School District Partnerships," examined the criteria for authentic shared governance and offered recommendations for connective leadership, shared decisionmaking, and community engagement. Dr. Miller received a dual degree, Ed.D in Educational Leadership and Executive Master of Nonprofit Leadership, from Seattle University. Her research interests include social justice in education, evaluation of educational intervention, and community engagement.

THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
"One best system" of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The ongoing analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and re-balance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities' approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

The Portfolio Network

Participating districts currently include Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Haven, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Washington, D.C.

Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.

- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.

- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

TO VIEW REPORTS FROM THIS PROJECT, VISIT WWW.CRPE.ORG.

Introduction

Many reformers have encouraged universities and school districts to work together to improve our nation's educational system.[1] Together, these institutions have the potential to accomplish what neither could accomplish alone. Presidents of major urban universities contend that urban revitalization and urban universities are not mutually exclusive.[2] So, why haven't more universities become involved in K-12 urban schools? Universities have the potential to serve as a major knowledge base and economic resource to positively address some of the challenges of their urban communities and schools. Too often, however, the history and traditions among universities and their communities[3] have created deep-rooted suspicions and frustrations on both sides that impede the potential for successful collaborative relationships.[4]

 Over the past two decades, district leaders have asked urban universities to develop emergency strategies to rescue low-performing public schools. Managing such endeavors has proven both complex and challenging, due in part to long-standing suspicions, the scope of reform, the complexity in authority relations, and, at scale, the enormous amount of coordinated efforts needed between partnering institutions. For the few urban universities that have accepted full or partial responsibility for the operation of public schools, and thereby accepted some accountability for student achievement, the ability to provide innovative and creative ways to ensure equity in learning opportunities and quality public education has been essential.[5]

While engaging in various reform initiatives, school districts tend to leave a good portion of their policies, controls, and practices intact.[6] School leaders and K-12 educators are often skeptical of reforms, reflecting their attitudes that "I have been here before this reform initiative and I will be here long after the next reform initiative." School leaders and teachers have seen so many reform initiatives layered one on top of another that this standing attitude, while understandable, has made implementing real change difficult. Implementing and successfully achieving real change would require shifting the attitude of individuals whose member identity has been built on values, beliefs, and past experiences of the institution's culture.

One might think that universities and school districts would make the best fit for an educational partnership, since both are in the business of education. However, in reality, universities and school districts have distinct cultural dynamics, languages, policies, reward systems, governance structures, and leadership.[7] Building a structure and process for a partnership that incorporates shared accountability and high-stakes testing requires some buy-in from both school districts and universities. As Rubin noted,

> *Collaboration is almost always more time-consuming and challenging than is acting on one's own because collaboration requires skills most of us were never taught, and because a collaborative way of thinking conflicts with the traditional structures and reward systems in which nearly all of us routinely work.*[8]

The question then becomes how do universities and school districts develop effective collaborative relationships that align with the mission of the university as well as the mission of the school district to meet the collective good. While armed with the goals and expertise of university faculty, the district central office, and school employees, some district leaders and university leaders have left the ability to manage people and resources to chance.

This working paper draws from the author's dissertation on shared governance and how two universities experienced a university-school district partnership in a portfolio district.[9]

Quotes presented in this article are drawn from interviews between the author and university representatives. Too often, self-reporting by universities and schools districts ascribes the successes and challenges associated with their participation in partnerships. I am grateful to the two universities and their former and current faculty, administrators, staff, and consultants who provided an opportunity for deep exploration of their experiences.

Following a brief description of the urban school district, the introduction provides a narrative about the historical relationship between the school district and universities and how these two university-school district partnerships came into existence. The next section describes factors that contributed to issues and conflicts that arose between the school district and universities during the universities' operation of public schools. The paper concludes with a discussion that may potentially help other localities engaging in similar partnerships.

MCQUERY SCHOOL DISTRICT

McQuery School District (pseudonym) is a large urban school district in the United States. The district had a large financial deficit that continued to grow. Approximately 75% of the students enrolled in the district qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch. Historically, the district produced students who performed below average on state standardized tests. As such, local and state policymakers debated on how best to strengthen public education. Unable to reach a consensus, the governor implemented a strategy to evaluate all school districts in the state. As part of an agreed upon reform strategy, state policymakers acknowledged that new management models were necessary to improve student achievement.

Executive leaders of the state made bold decisions to improve the quality of education provided to school districts that were identified as underperforming. Besides being in academic distress, McQuery School District was also identified as being in financial distress. Together, executive leaders of the state and district developed a portfolio of diverse providers, which included local universities and colleges, to manage its public schools. In order to reform McQuery School District, the district's administrative governance structure was dismantled, which was met with mixed emotions from the district, schools, and neighboring communities.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Under state leadership, the McQuery School District's board of education was dismantled and replaced by an appointed board. The new board hired a superintendent who implemented a systemic core curriculum, a system of benchmarks, and high-stakes testing. In a controversial move that drew intense community protest, political debate, and resistance, district leaders decided to approach school management using the portfolio model. Among other things, the portfolio district model was designed to inject competition between providers, the schools run by the district and those schools managed under contract. Competition among providers was a very unpopular notion in the community. People in the district felt they knew the needs of their schools and community best and could reform these schools from the inside. As one university representative described it, "competition created a destabilizing effect that pitted school district employees against outside providers." Some university representatives described how the educational environment became a constant scenario of us against them and insider/outsider as opposed to a collaborative relationship designed to strengthen student achievement. Other university representatives acknowledged that "there were people at the school district who individually wanted the partnerships to succeed."

Two University-School District Partnerships in a Portfolio District

Bluebell University (pseudonym) is a private research university; Lumbar University (also a pseudonym) is a public research university. Both universities are located in the same urban area as the McQuery School District. Both universities had pre-existing relationships with the school district and partnership schools. Some community members questioned the motives of the universities and whether their participation in managing neighborhood public schools meant that these schools would eventually be closed to make room for university administrative offices, dorms, or parking lots. Other community members saw the participation of these universities in education reform as a necessity.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONTRACTED PROVIDERS

McQuery School District's leaders began negotiations with both universities with a common framework to establish the initial contract. Through constant communications and negotiations between district leaders and each university's representatives, district leaders were able to customize contracts that were unique and incorporated the strengths of each university[10] and the expectations of the district. McQuery School District and both universities were guided by several overarching goals: (a) enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the K-12 system; (b) access research-based programs, curricula, and teaching strategies; (c) collaborate with partnership school principals on site-based decisions; and (d) increase educational resources available to schools.

MANAGING CONTRACTED PROVIDERS

McQuery School District's approach to overseeing contracted providers in this portfolio district frequently shifted. At one point, district leaders developed a special region geared specifically for contracted providers and assigned a superintendent. University representatives noted that different people filled the position of superintendent for contracted providers. The district created a partnership office staffed with a district liaison to support contracted providers in navigating the district's guidelines, policies, and procedures. Later, schools managed by contracted providers were placed in their original feeder pattern region. For some of the contracted providers the shift in region meant that they had schools in several different regions. At another point, district leaders grouped these providers into another region. Both universities' representatives described their interactions with several of the district liaisons as being very helpful, but the person in the district liaison position frequently changed. University representatives also worked closely with different superintendents, regional superintendents, chief academic officers, and parallel offices, such as the budget office, human resource office, and so on. As such, university representatives were constantly forming new relationships.

To oversee and manage the day-to-day operations, Bluebell University's College of Education developed a core leadership team comprised of faculty, administrators, staff and consultants who worked directly with partnership school principals and teachers. These team members represented experts in the fields of literacy, math, instruction, social development, afterschool programming, and data analyses. The function of the core leadership team and subgroups varied based on the needs of the university, school district, and partnership schools.

Lumbar University's executive administrators hired an executive director to manage the partnership initiative. The functions of the executive director varied depending on the needs of the university, school district, and partnership schools. To meet the district's performance targets, the executive director assembled a support team to work day-to-day with partnership school principals and teachers to implement the improvement plan.

Over time, Lumbar University restructured the internal governance structure for the partnership initiative. The partnership initiative was transferred to the College of Education, which opened up more opportunities for faculty involvement. The dean of the College of Education created a leadership team—consisting of College of Education faculty, practicing professors, staff, and partnership school principals—to manage the initiative. The function of the team varied depending on the needs of the university, district, and partnership schools.

It is worth noting that while McQuery School District and both universities created parallel governance structures[11] to represent the interest of each institution, address issues and concerns that arose, and create alignment across institution boundaries, the implementation strategy for both partnerships lacked the creation of a clear, agreed upon, collaborative model of management to provide mutual support within the partnership, to determine how decisions would be made, to resolve disputes, and to collaborate efforts whereby each university would function as a managing organization and partner.[12]

The previous section discussed the creation of parallel governance structures to manage the two university-school district partnerships. The next section describes how issues and conflicts arose when working across university-school district boundaries at multiple points—district leaders, district central office employees, and partnership school principals—became challenging.

Implementing Change in a Portfolio District

The portfolio district strategy was created while McQuery School District was in a state of flux. McQuery School District leaders had a limited amount of time to create a workable solution and receive state funding, thus the initial contracts between the district and the universities were on an emergency basis and had some built-in ambiguity to allow for revisions as implementation dictated. In both partnerships, key university representatives discussed the challenges of being a managing organization with a contract based on fee-for-service.

RATE OF CHANGE

Given the federal and state requirements for increased student achievement and the rate at which changes in student achievement needed to occur, the principals and both universities' representatives experienced challenges to focusing priorities. The principals wanted "short-term reactive kinds of actions" whereas both universities thought the best they could do was make steady and consistent changes over a period of time. Specifically challenging was the means and the forum to which institutions and individuals were being held accountable. District leaders were being held accountable to local and state officials. The superintendent as CEO was being held accountable to the mayor, executive leaders, and the community. As employees of the district, principals were being held accountable for increased student achievement by district leaders. The universities were being held accountable both to the community and the school district. The emergent processes to determine the pace and the focus of priorities led to challenging mixed authority relations.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Though negotiations among top leaders to reach a workable solution yielded results, the residuals of the battle for control had rippling effects on the school district. By taking an honest look and

diagnosing the district culture, district leaders would have recognized the level of resistance that ran rampant through the school district's central office, partnership schools, and the community. University representatives described being viewed as outsiders to the district central office; some principals were resistant to sharing site-based decisions; and some teachers were resistant to collaborative efforts with the universities. As university representatives indicated, when attempting to engage district leaders in discussions about the challenges within these schools and how the district could help contribute to their success, contracted providers found that it was most helpful being in the same region with one superintendent to address common concerns and the resistance they were encountering.

LEGITIMACY

Given the controversy surrounding the portfolio district model and the contracting[13] of public schools, the universities experienced challenges to being seen as legitimate partners. During the course of collaboration, university representatives faced considerable difficulties when presenting alternative approaches to the districts' traditional way of conducting business and arranging district services for partnership schools. They also suffered from differences between decisions made by the superintendent and the actions of district central office employees who were supposed to assist partnership schools.

Implementing Change at the School Level

Implementing change at the school level came with its own challenges. These university-school district partnerships were imposed on partnership school principals and teachers. As a result, Lumbar University experienced a high rate of teacher turnover for a number of years. In contrast, Bluebell University negotiated a voluntary transfer process with district leaders and the teachers union. University representatives felt that teachers should be given the choice whether or not to work together with the university. As university representatives explained, "there must be a willingness by district personnel and school personnel to work with you." One university representative indicated:

> There was a lot of relationship building to do with the principals. It was odd to have someone from the outside managing them. They felt they were in a very difficult situation having to report in some degree in two different ways. . . . Any time where someone comes and says, "Hi, I'm going to work with your schools," or "I'm in charge of your school." There is a lot of ground to cover before it starts being constructive.

Many individuals are under the impression that principals control the hiring of teachers and staff in their schools. However, in reality, a great deal of the human resources functions are carried out by the district central office.[14] For these two universities, there was a desire to control who worked in their schools. University representatives explained some of the overlapping transitions that occurred in the schools. Principals were required to attend district meetings, and they were required to attend university partnership meetings. While principals were required to develop various leadership teams, they were also figuring out how to work with the universities. One university representative suggested that, by restructuring school leadership to be inclusive of multiple stakeholders, "there were issues about who [should be] involved in the decision-making." This question about who should

be involved in the decision-making process led to issues about authority, accountability, and whose agenda was going to take precedence.

COLLABORATING WITH PRINCIPALS TO STRENGTHEN SITE-BASED DECISIONS

District leaders and university representatives agreed that partnership schools would retain their current principals, who would remain district employees. University representatives had some confidence in partnership school principals' ability to effectively manage their schools, to lead change, and to collaborate with one another. One Lumbar University representative explained that "that would be verified by that fact that those principals are still in place." He further stated:

> *The real question was how would we get to know each other and work effectively together where it appeared to them that there was a value proposition, that there was actually something that the university brought to the table beyond just money.*

Collaboration among university representatives and principals to develop the school improvement plan was supposed to alleviate some of the status apprehension, giving the illusion of an equal playing field. University representatives could bring their research-based knowledge, and partnership school principals could bring their theory of actions based on day-to-day practices within their schools. Together, they would develop and execute a plan to increase student achievement. However, challenges emerged when focusing priorities, considering alternative teaching techniques, increasing demands on principals, and making site-based decisions.

ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

District leaders allowed contracted providers the opportunity to implement their own curriculum, use the district's curriculum, or use a combination of both. In order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the K-12 system and maintain a level of familiarity, Bluebell University representatives accepted the district's core curriculum. As one university representative explained, "we take the givens, the curriculum the district has adopted, the assessment system it uses, and help teachers understand how to be effective in relationship to those." Bluebell University representatives described creating flexibility in scheduling professional development workshops as a positive. However, with so many layers of mandates, it became difficult to maintain creative flexibility.[15] For example, "when NCLB mandated afterschool services to kids, that [provision] competed with teachers' ability to attend professional development. Because the school district became a provider, rather than having the community provide the service."

Lumbar University's improvement strategy involved a combination of the district's curriculum and their own curriculum. The cornerstone of Lumbar University's approach to better schools was to create a strong, balanced literacy program. Lumbar representatives described how their literacy coach developed courses geared specifically for partnership school teachers to learn an alternative approach to teaching literacy across subjects. Even though the idea was met with some resistance, a large group of teachers received graduate course credits for completing these courses.

The courses and workshops created by both universities provided an opportunity to "shape local teacher training programs" and better prepare future teachers with the skills necessary to address some of the challenges of this urban school district.

While not signatories to the formal agreement, the teachers union had the potential to influence the success of university-school district partnerships. University representatives found that while the superintendent(s) would agree with their approach to professional development workshops and scheduling, approval for changes that impacted the collective bargaining agreement would have to be done through the teachers union and the union representatives assigned to the partnership schools. One university representative revealed:

> *Our ability to do things innovatively, creatively, differently at the school level depended a great deal on the personality, agenda, and opinion of the building representative. And, the teachers union representative was often willing to talk to their people or advocate . . . We had the teachers union teach some of the professional development courses. We tried to look for win-win situations.*

University representatives recognized that some of their alternative approaches conflicted with the collective bargaining agreement signed between the district and teachers union. University representatives discussed how their suggestions for changes in their partnership schools' teacher contracts were seen as good ideas for their partnership schools, but not necessarily good at scale for the district. As one university representative explained, "I think the unions unfortunately have a certain interest in not allowing changes. Doing it in one place suggests you could do it in general." University representatives also explained that the inability to redefine provisions in teachers' contracts limited what the universities could do. However, many of the university representatives described the value of having good relationships with the teachers union and their representatives, indicating that these were the more stable relationships in the district because union representatives were constant.

Governance

Given the political, economic, and educational environment in which this portfolio district was constructed, many university representatives interviewed did not depict the governance structure as shared. University representatives described working in the district's framework of conducting business with, at times, overlapping agendas. Early on, the universities were not quite sure what the district wanted nor what the reporting requirements were: "We didn't know what we were being measured on," explained one university representative. Once the district implemented an accountability system, district leaders requested specific information from contracted providers, such as test scores and "other measures of school progress as they defined them for which they were being held accountable through No Child Left Behind." District leaders required that this information be submitted by all contracted providers through a district structured table. Once in a common structure, district employees analyzed the data and produced monthly and quarterly reports. One university representative explained, "What they didn't particularly want or ask for was a lot of discourse about or narrative about what the change process was like in these schools…What are you struggling with? Where are you meeting with success?"

By working in isolation to develop an accountability system that impacted other institutions, McQuery School District may have potentially discouraged participation across institutional boundaries. Given the richness of research-based knowledge that the faculty of the College(s) of Education possess, the district might have benefited from their knowledge and expertise to inform their decisions

about accountability, benchmarks, indicators for growth, and performance standards. As university representatives explained, district leaders would publically use the rhetoric and logic of partners, but collaborative decisions on major issues that impacted the universities and partnership schools did not materialize in the day-to-day operations. One university representative noted:

> *Had district leaders thought less in the management and service provision term and more in partnership term, I believe that the district would have been substantially more interested in the details of what we were up to in these schools. . . . They would have been curious about the professional development activities underway. They would have been interested in the non-academic supports we called ourselves providing children and families. They would have been more interested in our views on how well things were going in these schools and surrounding neighborhoods. And there would have been in a matter of course and practice considerably more dialogue between district officials and Lumbar University officials about what's working and what's not. In my estimations there was relatively little, if any, of that kind of dialogue between the university and the school district before I got involved and after I got involved. So, even when you try as I did to alter the nature of the relationship by opening up a conversation in these broader ways, there really wasn't an audience for that.*

As one university representative explained, "governance was a mixed message to the university as well as the schools. I remember thinking, 'but who's reporting to whom?' which just adds confusion around the whole governance issue." Another university representative described how the occasional invitation for ideas and opinions did not mark any significant changes in policy, procedures, or processes. One university representative explained:

> *To me the real limiting factor on what we were able to do was the degree to which so many district structures and procedures and controls over the schools remained in place. I feel like we really didn't have a lot of scope to do things differently. Everyone in the school was still an employee of the school district, was still in the same collective bargaining unit they'd been in before, the same contracts. The budgetary processes were essentially the same. Clearly the contracts were the biggest. Everyone was under the same work rules as they were before. That, plus all of the relationships are still there. And, you need to get everything from every different part of the school district you did before. So, I think that the margin to which we could operate for it to have some different effect from the rest of the school district was pretty limited.*

While research suggests that, on average, schools contracted to these two universities did not perform better or worse than other schools in the district, there was an undercurrent that seemed to suggest a problem in the school system. As the quote above indicates and other university representatives affirmed, the real limiting factor was how much so many district structures, policies, and relationships remained the same. And, if the business of education by and large remained the same, then it would stand to reason that the net result for student achievement would remain the same.

AUTHORITY RELATIONS

In this portfolio district, there were always challenges with authority because, as one university

representative explained, "the lines of authority were so imprecisely drawn." There were many moving pieces under the umbrella of the partnership; the resulting complexity challenged not only contracted providers but district employees as well. If the transfer of authority was too narrow in scope, whereby university representatives could not maneuver or fully participate in a shared decision-making process, then the purposes of the university-school district partnership would be ignored and even undermined.

If university representatives began to believe their participation in the university-school district partnership was being undermined, and that the partnership was no longer mutually beneficial, then university representatives might withdraw from the partnership and/or redefine their role in a more limited way. Sirotnik and Goodlad (1988) stated the "history of school-university collaboration is not so much, then, replete with failure as it is short on examples of carefully crafted agreements and programs accompanied by the ingredient considered by Clark (1986) to be essential for success— namely, individual and institutional commitment on both sides" (p. 12).

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION FLOW ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Disclosure of information was not always effective or efficient and, at times, it negatively impacted the productivity of contracted providers. Given the complex web of school district governance, there were multiple avenues for receiving and disclosing information, but not all stakeholders received all reports. Some data were shared between district leaders and contracted providers; others between district leaders and principals; still others between district leaders and community members, contracted providers and principals, and contracted providers and community members. University representatives felt out of the loop on many important communications.

Despite challenges with effective communication across institutional boundaries, district leaders had a bigger challenge with the lack of communication about the direction of the district, whether the decision was about curricular or priority of instruction. One university representative noted,

> *Decisions about the direction of the school district would come out as goal settings or priorities for the district. Decisions would be announced and, if they were not consistent in the direction [university representatives and principals] had been going, then that would hinder our ability to do what we were looking to do.*

Essential to the success of introducing a new way of managing schools is the ability to not only communicate the goals of the district to contracted providers but also to be willing to establish a feedback mechanism to surface ideas and opinions that influence decisions and the decisionmaking process.

University representatives indicated that the disclosure of information was also limited because of the lack of full access to student information. University representatives shared stories about traveling to partnership schools to gain access to the principals' terminals for information that would help them advise principals about site-based decisions. While university representatives understood the importance of confidentiality with respect to student information, the limited access made it difficult to make informed decisions, especially when developing plans for students with special needs.

Instability in Leadership

When the former superintendent was in office, he preferred site-based management. He encouraged more charter schools. He was encouraging this private-nonprofit organization management . . . Partly because the state was pushing it, but in part because he believed in it. The next superintendent was somewhat more interested in exercising direct control over schools. Although she had proposed some schools that were managed by the district be turned over to private management . . . We are waiting to see what that looks like.

McQuery School District experienced a high turnover in executive leadership during the course of the universities' operation of public schools. As with any organization, the portfolio district demands stable leadership. Where leadership is erratic, cohesiveness in policy and practices is weakened. Other destabilizing affects identified in this portfolio district included: (a) the handling of multiple reform initiatives layered one on top of the other, (b) changing boundaries, (c) power centers where decisions were made in isolation, (d) instances of ambiguity in authority relations, and (e) institutional commitment.

One university representative described the partnership as *a complicated relationship of delegated authority* in which one element of the partnership was collaboration between district leaders and university representatives, and another element was collaboration between university representatives and school leaders. As one university representative explained:

Ultimately, it depends on the personal relationships with the principals and the folks at the university or the people who are leading the university's side of the university enterprise. Then it depends of how much trust there is between the teachers, schools, and principals, and parents, kids, and principals, and so on. If the principals have been able to establish reasonably good trusting relationships, then it would make our role clearer and a lot easier. . . . They have both been working to generate a lot of confidence in the faculty and trust on the part of the faculty. I think some progress is being made but there is more to be made. So, that goes around to why we provide principal coaching with a very experienced urban principal who acts as the coach.

Instability in leadership is an issue in many urban school districts. In the book, *Fixing Urban Schools*, Hill and Celio note that "superintendents keep their jobs, on average, for three years," and leave due to personal reasons and/or professional opportunities. For McQuery School District the average was slightly higher. McQuery School District hired superintendents with strong reputations for reforming urban school districts. Unfortunately, reducing the deficit was not part of their reform strategies. Like many urban school districts, this district was dependent on state funding and carried a large financial deficit that continued to grow. With the departure of each superintendent, the district was left with an unfinished reform strategy, a growing financial deficit, and in search of the next "Superman." Interim superintendents attempted to continue on the path of the previous superintendent until the next superintendent was hired. The next superintendent came with their idea of reform without necessarily building from what the previous superintendent had started. In the meantime, district central office employees, principals, and teachers were left

to pick up the pieces and bridge the sometimes competing reform strategies. If the central office, principals, and teachers are the base components of the school system and represent the greatest stability, then the role they play in implementing strategies for education reform is essential. But, what should their role be?

One analysis suggests that the district central office should just do its job. The central office is where schools managed by the district and contracted providers interact with various individuals to receive services for their schools and fill teacher vacancies, and where decisions by the superintendent are carried out. Some university representatives described instances of disconnect between the words of the superintendent and the deeds of the district central office. For example, one university representative described how central office employees decided whether or not partnership schools should receive services, even though it was agreed to by the superintendent. Sometimes, the collaborative work between the district central office and university representatives contributed to confusion, frustration, and mistrust across institutional boundaries.

Another analysis suggests that contracted providers are getting stalled by the very policies, standard operating procedures, and governance structures that reform sought to change. On one hand, a recurring response by university representatives about accountability was, how can you be held politically and publicly accountable for outcomes in a system where you had little to no control of making the necessary changes to improve student achievement and meet the district's performance targets? On the other hand, one university representative noted, "When push came to shove, the district as a bureaucracy had a hard time dealing with all of the idiosyncrasies of the university partnership." However, some of the challenges described by university representatives derived from the political struggle for control of the district, the central office and school employees' predisposition to suspicion of outsiders, and the district reform strategy itself.

Yet another analysis suggests further research is needed on the role of external influences on portfolio districts and the decisions made by portfolio district leaders. As in the case of McQuery School District, some urban school districts do not operate autonomously. Many decisions, including funding, are dependent on state policymakers. What role does their influence have on strengthening or limiting the quality of education for students in low-performing schools? As Hill et al. note,

> *None of these groups want schools to be hopelessly tied up in rules, mandates, and limitations; each thinks the requirements it imposes will make schools better. In aggregate, however, the constraints imposed by this complex governance system are the sources to many school problems and roadblocks to improvement.*

Through the years, McQuery School District has made strides in overcoming some of these challenges and roadblocks. However, district leaders still have a ways to go to promote continuity in leadership and collaborative decisionmaking that spans across multiple levels within the school district and contracted providers. Continuity in leadership and collaborative decisionmaking will provide the structure for a shared and integrated process, whereas district employees and contracted providers become a part of the reform process.

Overcoming Challenges in a Portfolio District

Overcoming some of the challenges described above can only be achieved through effective communication and accountability measures. As one university represented suggested, "We can only learn from our experiences. I would make changes that reflect what I learned." Another university representative explained:

> *I think the district is such a big organization and to sort of introduce a new concept of a way of working there would have been a lot of institutional work, which I don't think was done. You had a lot of people who formed their own opinion about outside managers. Some might be hostile. Some also used it as an excuse to draw a smaller circle around what they were responsible for. . . . There was too much work to do and too big of a school district where people would very readily say, 'partnership schools were managed by someone else. They are not getting these services.'*

To build confidence in the portfolio strategy, district leaders made and will need to continue making concerted efforts to restore public confidence in their ability to be effective leaders while also cultivating new relationships with contracted providers. District leaders have to lead the organizational change process because of the number of people in different groups, the number of separate channels of communication, the power centers for decision-making, and "getting leadership at a lot of different levels" involved in the overall vision of the portfolio. If district leaders do not develop a collaborative model of management to facilitate shared power, shared decision-making, and conflict resolution, then contracted providers will likely become more and more frustrated with the lack of change and the preservation of the district status quo. University representatives indicated that when conflicts between the will of the district and the will of the universities could not be resolved, district leaders were inclined to rely on the status quo.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Where collaborative efforts are based on competition, distrust, and political tension, the ability to build effective relationships at multiple levels within a complex organization, such as the school district and neighboring communities may not be forthcoming or easily achieved. Building effective relationships requires building trust. University representatives indicated, extensive time and cultivation is needed to build trust and bring about change at different levels within the school district.

Due to the state takeover and the reservations community members had about the portfolio district model and the capabilities of district leaders, district leaders had to find ways to build trusting relationships. One university representative noted that if the district was less focused on competing with schools run by the university and more actively focused on partnering with the university to increase student achievement, there may have been potentially greater improvement across the district portfolio.

Working together, district leaders and contracted providers could only achieve trusting relationships over a period of time, through interactions, experiences, and the cultivation of those relationships. District leaders began building effective relationships by communicating with the community and contracted providers more frequently. The district meetings with contracted providers focused on common concerns. Contracted providers used each other as resources for additional information. As one university representative reflected on the experience, she explained:

In my last two years, the district . . . would have each partner, each outside provider, come in for an individual appointment with the team of school district folks, where we would look at the data, talk about the challenges, and talk about the successes. Actually, that was among the most helpful arenas for information sharing.

Portfolio district leaders must be open to new ways of conducting the business of education. Specifically, in order to fulfill the collective good, full advantage of university expertise and district expertise must be leveraged through the establishment of a mechanism that engages all members in collective decision-making and feeds back into the partnership at the district level. Engaging university representatives will not only legitimatize the partnership, but will help build trusting relationship among the groups.

In a candid discussion about the dissolution of the partnership and the potential for the university to enter into another contract to manage and operate public schools, one university representative expressed some optimism:

I think if everyone sat down and took a deep breath and said, 'now, how do we want this to work?' I think we could revisit the [notion of a partnership] now that we have a lot of experience. I think we would do things differently.

In addition, district leaders should implement structures that support creating and sustaining a culture of diversity. These structures should provide opportunities for contracted providers, district leaders, and district employees that promote dialogue, fellowship, and interactions among each other.

Overcoming Challenges at the School Level

One university representative interviewed described participating with "principals or groups of parents in interviewing or reviewing resumes." This provided an opportunity for contracted providers to "have some control over who gets hired." Other ways university representatives described building capacity with principals included:

1. **Coaching**. *We provide principal coaching with an experienced urban principal who acts as the coach. . . . She is the mirror, coach, and everything else coaches do.*

2. **Communication**. *If you are the principal . . . and you have this humongous university with all sorts of resources available to you, the challenge is to figure out how to use the university to the advantage of every one at the school, the teachers, kids, parents, your neighborhood and so on. Most principal training programs do not teach principals how to use university resources or community resources, particularly because of NCLB pressures. Principals tend to get focused on improving reading and math scores. The idea that you can access the university to help you do this is kind of an abstraction. So a lot of our work is to help principals and teacher leaders from the schools understand how to use us, who we are, and what we offer.*

3. **Compromise**. *We met weekly as a leadership team. I listened to them describe the kinds of things in their school improvement plans and the kinds of issues they were facing in their schools and try to match faculty interest and expertise with the concerns that they raised. For example, there were some disciplinary concerns so we looked at conflict resolution as a strategy that could be introduced to teachers during staff development. There were some parental involvement concerns, so we looked at an ongoing project that was being run here by one of our faculty members in collaborations with another university. We tried to address the needs as they were defined by the schools.*

4. **Grade Group Meetings**. *One of the observations that emerged about front-end assessment and student achievement was that the formative assessment only relates to student achievement when principals are actively involved in the discussion with teachers about interpreting the assessments, i.e., principals must go to grade group meetings.*

Together, principals and university representatives continue to work through the challenges of developing a collaborative way of thinking, which includes adjusting to arbitrary decisions by district leaders that sometimes obstruct their efforts. In describing the shift in relationships between principals and university representatives, one university representative explained:

> *As people develop relationships, it's easier for them to work in partnership. There is a higher level of trust that develops over time. By the end of that period of time, there was a greater level of trust. I would say at three of the schools, people would call me at home, call my cell phone, they would look to back me up and I would look to back them up.*

For this portfolio district, *building a climate of trust*[16] proved to be an uphill battle. While there is still work to be done, university representatives and principals are moving toward a culture grounded in part by consensus building. Consensus building requires development of a representative conflict resolution structure that encourages give-and-take without sacrificing authentic participation and without diminishing the capacity for the university, schools, and community to positively contribute adequate resources to strengthen children's education. It requires the simultaneous application of critical inquiry and effective communication.

Building Capacity in a Portfolio District

Given the challenges to framing not only the problem but also the collaborative relationships with contracted providers to create better schools and increase student achievement, university representatives offered some insightful suggestions:

PLAN CHANGE

Collaborative efforts require an investment of time to plan and prepare for changes to short-and long-term goals. District leaders focused on meeting NCLB student achievement requirements that tied into funding, while the universities focused on how to build better schools and sustain increased student achievement over the long run. By collaboratively designing the accountability system,

district leaders may potentially enhance the measurements for performance standards, buy-in among diverse providers, and goals for increasing student achievement. Feedback is an essential element to the change process and to the modification of the strategic plan.[17] Utilizing an assessment tool to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the portfolio to flourish would guide the direction for focusing priorities. One focus of the assessment should be: does the partnership do what we would like for it to do? If not, how can we improve the flexibility of the partnership process while staying aligned with the mission of the university and the mission of the school district?

REALIZE THE LEVEL OF RESISTANCE

Portfolio district leaders must realize the levels of resistance and plan accordingly. This is not to say that the workable solution (the portfolio district strategy) was not the best solution for building better schools in the McQuery School District; this is to say that, in order to create an environment for implementing change and building confidence in the strategy, district leaders must be willing to take the time to effectively communicate the vision, address concerns, and allow for continuous open feedback from all stakeholders to inform future decisions and move the vision forward.

As described earlier, the district central office, principals, and teachers represent stability in the school district, whereas superintendents and reform strategies come and go. The portfolio district model places a lot of demand on the district central office because it is the central nervous system for schools operated by both the district and contracted providers. If the portfolio district models' success depends so heavily on the central office, then there has to be an avenue for the central office to voice their concerns and challenges in order to reduce some of the resistance.

MANAGE RESISTANCE

Managing resistance is about managing human resources. The district portfolio model represents a multitude of ways to meet the needs of the district and student learning. But, without the ability to nurture and cultivate diverse relationships, portfolio district leaders cannot reap the full potential of the model. Given the levels of resistance encountered by university representatives as they navigated the different parts of the school district, portfolio district leaders must lead organizational change processes at different levels in the district as district employees adjust to alternative ways of conducting business.

> *The real world it is less perfect. There isn't always time for as much collaborative decision-making that would be ideal. Lots of time you are doing triage to address the most immediate needs because the educational system itself is not perfect. And when both entities work within an imperfect system it is more difficult. In some ways it's more difficult and in some ways it's easier; because each of us understands the nature of working with uncertainty. All of us in the end are educators, school district and university. And, so we all understand the nature of a bureaucratic beast. And, we all have to work with some ambiguity.*

The levels of resistance in McQuery School District changed over time, interactions, and communications. As discussed in the previous section, district leaders worked with university representatives and union representatives to create a voluntary transfer agreement that allowed teachers the choice of working in collaboration with the university. District leaders created more frequent meetings with contracted providers to discuss common concerns and changes in policies, and to provide a more effective way of sharing information, at scale.

HAVE REALISTIC GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Aside from test scores, what are the other challenges keeping urban school children from achieving? Poverty is a huge issue. There were ways that both universities addressed other factors affecting student achievement. For example, both universities provided direct serves to the schools, such as health screening programs. Given the multiple factors that may be keeping children from achieving, decide what are realistic goals and expectations without losing the rigor and quality of education.

BRING REFORM TO SCALE

Despite facing the many challenges associated with urban districts, portfolio district leaders must find ways to increase student achievement at scale. Evident by some of the earlier discussions, proposed changes were seen as good ideas at the school level but not necessarily at scale. One university representative noted:

> *District executives were generally quite helpful in solving problems with us at the schools to make it possible for us to all do our best work to meet those goals. We would have budget people who were available to help or HR people or personnel service people. So, at one level they were often willing to talk through issues and help find solutions. At another level, their hands were often tied. 'This is the way we district executives do things. This is the policy. This is the law. I can't waive this. This is the union . . . so on and so on.*

District leaders find themselves in a unique opportunity to expand the resources available to their district. To capitalize on the resources available through universities and other contracted providers, district leaders must encourage authentic participation by multiple stakeholders and decision-makers, who are knowledgeable of, concerned about, and interested in improving the education of the children in the community. Bringing the reform to scale requires a willingness by district leaders to learn from those who represent the character and assets of the school district, universities, and surrounding communities and constructively apply that information when making decisions that directly impact the community.

DEVELOP A CLEAR GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

If portfolio district leaders negotiate contracts whereby contracted providers are co-managing public schools, then there must be a clear understanding of authority, of how decisions are made and conflicts are resolved, and how decisions made by the collective group would be relayed to the public and partnering institutions. Evident by previous discussions about the issues that arose during the universities' operation of public schools, the lack of a collaborative model of management resulted in and will continue to result in confusion about and challenges to the decision-making and problem-solving processes, potentially leading to feelings of frustration, distrust, and an unwillingness to compromise. One university representative explained that, "In shared governance, people feel that their organizational and professional needs are being met by the partnership."

In order for portfolio district leaders to achieve the full potential of working with contracted providers, district leaders must develop a mechanism that allows contracted providers the opportunity to surface ideas and suggestions based on their experiences and expertise. Good decisions about the leadership of the partnership and partnership schools can be made when both groups collectively take those ideas and suggestions into consideration, thus leading others in the district to see those decisions as legitimate.

Summary

The tensions between McQuery School District and contracted providers highlighted some of the challenges university representatives experienced when operating public schools in a portfolio district. For portfolio district leaders to reach the full potential of having contracted providers who choose to share leadership and accountability as opposed to creating public charters, changing the balance of who controls public schools is required. In the absence of a shared governance structure, the challenges of connecting theories of action with practices across institutional boundaries, as discussed in this paper, will continue to exist. Portfolio district leaders must find ways to create a new aspect of the organizations' culture that is inclusive of diverse providers, accepting of divergent views, and open to innovative ways of creating better schools. In addition, portfolio district leaders must find better ways to link the district central office, principals, and teachers to a reform strategy that is inclusive and representative of the body of knowledge and experiences they possess.

NOTES

[1] B. A. Berliner, *What it takes to work together: The promise of educational partnerships* (Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997); K. A. Sirotnik and J. I. Goodlad, *School-university partnerships in action: Concepts, cases, and concerns* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1988); R. Ravid and M. G. Handler, *The many faces of school-university collaboration* (Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 2001).

[2] R. M. Freeland, "Universities and cities need to rethink their relationships," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51, no. 36 (2005): 20.

[3] Community is defined as a broad group of people, including the school district, local businesses, and citizens, who are directly impacted by the decisions made by those in authority positions.

[4] See, for example, Freeland, "Universities and cities need to rethink," 20.

[5] E. Goldring and P. Sims, "Modeling creative and courageous school leadership through district-community-university partnerships," *Education Policy* 19, no. 1 (2005): 223-249.

[6] See, for example, P. T. Hill and M. B. Celio, *Fixing Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1998).

[7] R. W. Clark, "School-university relationships: An interpretive review," in *School-university partnerships in action*, ed. Sirotnik and Goodlad, 32-65.

[8] H. Rubin, *Collaborative leadership: Developing effective partnerships in communities and schools* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 2002).

[9] J. N. Miller, *Perceptions of university administrators, faculty, and staff engaged in the shared governance of university-school district partnerships*, Doctoral Dissertation, Seattle University, 2010.

[10] University leaders were given the opportunity to manage public schools under a public charter model. However, for individual reasons each university elected to develop management partnerships whereas human resources, debt obligations, paraprofessional contracts, and other details would remain the responsibility of the school district.

[11] J. I. Goodlad (1988) asserts that the governing body should include school district leaders and university deans or senior administration from the college(s) of education. By incorporating members of senior administration from both the school district and university to the shared governance of a university-school district partnership, there exists aspects of knowledge transfer that allows for shared decisionmaking, interdependency, interdisciplinary approaches, and communication flow that can be measured over time and interactions. P. Cheng, C. J. Choi, and T. I. Eldomiaty, "Governance structures of socially complex knowledge flows: Exchange, entitlement and gifts," *The Social Science Journal* 43 (2006): 653-657.

[12] The concept university-school district partnership implies a shift in the decisionmaking process that requires participation by both universities and school districts. The concept also implies that governance functions are neither top-down nor bottom-up, but a combination of both.

[13] P. T. Hill, L. Pierce, and J. W. Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How contracting can transform America's schools* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[14] See P. E. Johnson and J. H. Chrispeels, "Linking the central office and its school for reform," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 46, no. 5 (2010): 738-755.

[15] See Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie. They discuss the various interest groups who develop rules, mandates, and limitations designed to make schools better. However, "these constraints imposed by complex governance systems are the sources of many school problems, and roadblocks to improvement."

[16] Venable and Gardiner (1988, p.5) explain that it would take "time and careful cultivation to establish a climate of trust because credibility is only built upon a record of fair and altuistic behavior. Neither the charismatic exercise of authority nor the extention of the promise of future rewards for blind faith will contribute to trust." W. Venable and J. J. Gardiner, *Synergistic governance, leadership teams, and the academic department head*, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, St. Louis, MO, November 1988.

[17] B. Bass, *Organizational decision making* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1983).