Building a Governance Ecosystem

Themes and Recommendations

from the Rhode Island

Education Governance Forum

Since 2010, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) has been committed to reshaping the high school learning experience by working with districts, schools, and organizations to implement the principles of student-centered learning (SCL) – learning that is personalized, engaging, and competency-based, and that happens anytime, anywhere. As NMEF has grappled with how to sustain and scale that work, it has become clear that the Foundation must also consider how education governance plays into those efforts. The Foundation has embarked on a learning phase to better understand the challenges and opportunities around education governance in communities in New England.

About the Rhode Island Education Governance Forum

In Rhode Island, NMEF chose the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) – whose staff bring deep expertise in convening and facilitating to support equity-centered, collaborative systemic change – to organize and facilitate a Rhode Island Education Governance Forum on November 3, 2016. In addition to the statewide learning forum, AISR engaged local education stakeholders in focus group conversations and surveys around governance issues they have encountered in their work. Participants included:

- teachers, principals, and superintendents;
- public officials from school committees, the Rhode Island General Assembly, and city governments;
- representatives from the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and Board of Education;
- leaders from the state teachers' union, education reform support organizations, education associations (representing school committees, superintendents, and charter schools), parent advocacy organizations (including those working in ethnic communities), youth organizing groups, and policy institutes;
- and researchers.

Key Themes

Stakeholders in both the outreach efforts and the Forum were active and thoughtful participants, and many expressed a desire to continue the conversation about SCL and transformative governance reform beyond this specific engagement.

Overall, we heard three essential takeaways from Forum and outreach participants:

- We need the right people at the table, with a shared set of values, to develop, communicate, and sustain the best transformative governance reforms to advance student-centered learning.
- More meaningful community[1] engagement around education governance is critical.
- The current governance structure in Providence has too many unhelpful layers to get to student-centered learning at scale. It is not working well, and as Providence education goes, so goes the state.

Governance Challenges

Participants identified many overarching and cross-cutting governance challenges to education reform efforts like student-centered learning in three basic categories: values, politics, and structures.

VALUES

- Lack of a state constitutional right to an education for all Rhode Island students[2]
- Lack of a clear education vision from the state
- Lack of cultural competence, lived experience, and broad stakeholder engagement in decision-making
- Over-influence of local control for control's sake

[1] We primarily define "community" at the grassroots level to include parents, other adult residents, and youth; occasionally, however, participants referenced other broader community stakeholders such as community-based organizations and institutions of higher education, which we included in the community category.

[2] Connecticut's recent judicial ruling is cited as a counter example.

- Lack of clarity in definitions and terminology around SCL
- Lack of a positive message about the progress being made

POLITICS

- Frequent leadership transitions
- Perception of teachers' unions
- Mayoral control without accountability

STRUCTURES

- Lack of role clarity for many governance stakeholders
- Need for more flexibility in budgeting
- Need for robust data sharing and data sharing agreements
- Lack of implementation capacity, flexibility, and communication
- Need for community/parent organizing groups and structures
- Lack of adequate training and support for school committees
- Unwieldy governance structures in Providence and Central Falls

Design Principles for New Governance Approaches and Strategies

In response to these local challenges and to "examples from the field" profiles of governance challenges faced by three districts (Central Falls, Rhode Island; Hartford, Connecticut; and Newark, New Jersey), we heard participants articulating two critical design principles for any new governance approaches and strategies: (1) that *the governance*

structure should be informed by a set of shared values and aligned across all partners; and (2) that *community members need to be involved in decision making.*

DESIGN PRINCIPLE 1
CLEARLY DEFINED SHARED VALUES

Our work on collaborative action shows that a set of shared values and partners aligned around those values should drive structure if transformative change is to be sustained.[3] This idea came through in panels and discussions during the Forum. For example, most Rhode Island stakeholders agreed that it is important for all students to succeed, but when asked to define what "success for all" means, participants disagreed both on the answer and the values that drive their responses, which included equity, workforce considerations, and student-centered learning.

Throughout the Forum, from the opening morning panel to the fishbowl discussion in the afternoon, we heard a hunger for reforming local governance into a "governance ecosystem" consisting of and accountable to a range of stakeholders to ensure that all students graduate college and career ready.[4] Attendees spoke of their eagerness to push the conversation around reform from *talk* to *action.* Creating space for a carefully facilitated, frank conversation to agree on some common values across this governance ecosystem will be a much-needed start. Some of the unifying values that participants suggested include a commitment to:

- A baseline set of opportunities for all students.
- A push for equity locally and nationally.
- Involving a critical mass of stakeholders to advance transformative practice.
- Flexibility, striking a balance between having definition and context set by a governance structure *and* building in the flexibility and access to stakeholders shaping and changing the process. Many current structures either seem to codify things too much (e.g. Providence) or leave things too loose (e.g. the state role).
- Common messaging across stakeholders, especially the governor, RIDE, and community partners.

[3] See past AISR reports such as *Partnerships for College Readiness, Collaborating for Equity, and We Made a Promise.*

[4] AISR defines an educational ecosystem as the interconnected network of individuals and organizations who work to provide educational opportunities and support for student success across a system. These may include schools and school districts and their staff; students, families, and communities; community organizing groups; education agencies and non-profit organizations; elected officials, advocates, and media; foundations and private investors; and researchers.

Since 1991, RIDE has assumed financial responsibility for the Central Falls School District (CFSD), which is governed by a seven-member Board of Trustees appointed by the state. In 2010, when teachers and administrators at Central Falls High School refused to accept some of the terms for school restructuring required by the No Child Left Behind Act, the district fired the entire faculty and administrative staff. After an unsuccessful lawsuit by the teachers' union, the teachers and administrators were hired back only when they agreed to comply with the restructuring terms.

Just as the city of Central Falls successfully emerged from bankruptcy with a renewed sense of positive energy in 2012, many positive changes and a spirit of innovation have arisen in CFSD since the high school transformation process, including partnerships with Rhode Island College, community organizations, and charter schools.

Because the superintendent and many members of CFSD's Board of Trustees come from Central Falls or similar densely-populated cities with large immigrant communities, they feel a strong connection and commitment to Central Falls and have made it a priority to build trust and relationships, prioritize family and community engagement, and include parents and CFSD alumni on the board.

For more on CFSD, see AISR's Self-Assessment Tools for Districts reports and the article on CFSD's family engagement partnerships in Voices of Urban Education issue no. 44, "Fostering Family Engagement through Shared Leadership in the District, Schools, and Community."

DESIGN PRINCIPLE 2
COMMUNITY-CENTERED DECISION MAKING

Participants spoke consistently about the need to shift away from traditional, top-down governance structures toward more participatory and democratic governance. Although there was not consensus on what participatory structures should look like, the example of Central Falls (see sidebar) resonated with many Forum attendees, and also raised questions:

- In Central Falls, what seems to work is that "the people in power are in agreement: young people [come] first." This common charge helps to move things forward. Central Falls School District leaders reported that for many of them it is personal to "speak with that kind of passion" from their own experiences on issues of access and opportunity. This kind of personal engagement, they argue, is relatively unique around an education governance table at any level in Rhode Island, and has led to a shared, long-term vision for the future as well as greater stakeholder alignment.

- All voices should be participating in governance. Districts and the state should be creating the structures that allow meaningful participation for all stakeholders, including youth. But how do we bring governance to the people? Parent-teacher organizations, student councils, and other groups should be used more strategically for school committee members to engage stakeholders. Participants also suggested using YouTube to share meetings and invite input.

- We need to interrupt the narrative of "dysfunctional democracy," in which community members who speak out on issues of governance (such as those who protested the NCLB requirements for Central Falls High School) are perceived as disruptive. A high-quality communications strategy is necessary to help tell the story and frame the narrative of participatory governance as constructive, democratic, and necessary, even though it can be messy. The Partnership for the Future of Learning is one approach cited that focuses on the story of participatory governance, helping define the "we" in "we the people" in relation to education governance.

The key question remains: What are the catalytic components that could come together to tip the scales toward transformative governance reform, and do they come from the top down or the bottom up? Participants noted that stakeholders are sometimes galvanized by a watershed crisis moment, such as a state takeover or the prospect of school closings. Others suggest statewide legislative action to endorse a student bill of rights and using the courts as a way to spur action and accountability. This is the social, cultural, and political work of reform – rather than the technical, structural aspects – and participants recommend that this work will need long-term, facilitated support to sustain momentum. We heard a clear interest in continuing the conversations begun at the Forum, using it as a springboard for action.

Positive Approaches to Teaching, Learning, and Governance: Strategies at the School, District, State, and Community Levels

Participants noted that on a policy and practice level, Rhode Island is leading the country in blended learning implementation for SCL through initiatives such as the statewide personalized learning initiative, wireless innovation, and the Highlander Institute FUSE Fellows program.

SCHOOLS

At the *school level*, the community school model resonated with participants overall as both a platform for SCL and a potential structure for participatory governance. In many community schools, school planning committees and governance councils are comprised of parents, residents, community partners, teachers, and administrators. Currently, the Rhode Island Partnership for Community Schools is supporting Child Opportunity Zones for schools in ten communities.

DISTRICTS

At the *district level*, participants responded positively to several governance strategies or approaches:

- *School autonomy:* Decentralizing decision-making to the school level, with the district in more of a support and accountability role. Forum attendees and interviewees made connections to: Empowerment Schools, modeled after Innovation Schools in Massachusetts and enabled through legislation passed in 2016 by the Rhode Island General Assembly; the Hartford district management model (see sidebar, next page); and the current policy of the Providence School Board, which is in the process of implementation.

- *Leadership alignment across constituencies:* For example, as a department of the City, with school board members appointed by the mayor subject to city council approval, the Providence Public Schools has by all accounts an incredibly complex, multi-layered governance structure involving the state, district, school board, city council, mayor, and community. These many layers can be a serious impediment to progress, but when there is alignment across the many stakeholders in the governance structure, it bodes well for students, families, the district, and the entire state.

- *District-charter collaboration:* Forum participants raised Central Falls as a positive local example. From a values standpoint, school district leaders spoke of the importance of understanding all students as "our kids" across both traditional and charter schools in a city or district, since many parents have children in both types of schools. It is important to understand what makes this partnership work in Central Falls, when so many others speak of the desire for collaboration without being able to partner successfully across barriers such as funding.

- *Hybrid elected-and-appointed school boards:* Intrigued by the Hartford model, participants discussed whether because both appointed and elected structures have challenges, a dual model could help present the best of both and ameliorate the challenges of each.

F *Local school governance councils:* Participants found this intriguing as a participatory decision-making structure in Hartford, but raised many questions about what it would take to reach full implementation.

STATE

At the *state level*, participants focused on the possible positive governance implications of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which has the flexibility to allow for a range of governance approaches, including portfolio models at the district level and community and empowerment schools. Regardless of the district governance approach, however, RIDE's role should include a focus on learning from schools that are improving; statewide advocacy and communication strategy around the need for SCL; and inclusion of student, parent, and community involvement as a possible indicator in a new ESSA accountability system.

COMMUNITY

At the *community level*, many participants were captivated by Generation All in Chicago as a model for cross-sector collaboration around a governance agenda that includes parents, youth, and other residents as decision makers in a very public way. Attendees and interviewees liked that Generation All involved students in visioning what an ideal school would look like, which also happened in the recent development of Carnegie-funded schools in Providence. Existing approaches for including youth in governance that were cited also include the Providence Youth Caucus, the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet's Our Children Our City, and community schools.

Conclusion

The Rhode Island Education Governance Forum was designed to test the waters in the state and to identify launch points for future governance-focused work embedded in student-centered learning. Participants demonstrated that there is interest and enthusiasm for ongoing engagement around the complex issue of education governance. We hope that through our stakeholder outreach and Forum, we have created the space for a sustainable

conversation about transformative governance reform in Rhode Island, which will ultimately lead to sustained investment and action.

GOVERNANCE SNAPSHOT

Hartford, Connecticut

Hartford Public Schools (HPS) is governed by a board consisting of four elected members and five individuals appointed by the mayor. They are responsible for top-level district-wide decisions that affect the direction and progress of HPS. HPS pursues a strategy of portfolio management to raise pre-K–12 student achievement, defined as: closing and redesigning chronically low-performing schools, opening new schools, and using data to guide these decisions. In current practice, while there has been a proliferation of magnet and charter schools, no other schools have been closed or replicated for the past few years.

The state of Connecticut and HPS employ school governance councils (SGCs) to enable parents, school staff, students, and community leaders to work together to improve student achievement. Half of the membership of each SGC is made up of parents of students enrolled at that school, with the remaining members coming from the school (including students), the community, and community partners. SGCs serve in an advisory capacity and are charged with assisting the school administration in making program and operational changes to improve the school's achievement. As of 2016, less than half of all schools in Hartford had formed SGCs.