

School Boards
Driving Turnaround

New Haven Public Schools

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<http://centeronschoolturnaround.org>

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School Boards Driving Turnaround Series

Many schools are not preparing students for success in the 21st century. Far too many students are dropping out, and many of those who do graduate lack the key skills to succeed in college or the advanced economy. Successfully initiating, implementing, and sustaining the transformation of the lowest-performing public schools is a pressing challenge for policy leaders and practitioners nationwide. Public schools governed by local school boards are one of the cornerstones of our nation's democracy, and local school boards sit at the junction of policy and effective implementation of targeted turnaround efforts. Yet ongoing efforts to improve public education focus primarily on the role of teachers, principals, and superintendents and, to a lesser extent, on state and federal policymakers. Missing from the work is a substantive role for local school boards. In line with the Center on School Turnaround's charge to support states' efforts, we sought to highlight three districts engaged in focused turnaround efforts where their respective boards played a key role in catalyzing, shaping, and supporting targeted improvement efforts. This brief is one of three describing the work. Our goal in developing these briefs is to present information-rich cases that could inform state and district efforts to optimize the board's role in school turnaround.

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At New Haven Public Schools, we believe that all kids can learn, achieve, and rise to a bright future. Our purpose is to provide an outstanding education that extends beyond graduation and prepares our students to be the next generation of leaders, innovators, and problem-solvers.

Introduction

Site Selection

Local school boards are often seen as a barrier to turning around low-performing schools and districts (Hess & Meeks, 2011; Rhim, 2013; Shober & Hartney, 2014). In seeking to identify examples of boards actively engaged in their districts' turnaround efforts, we sought nominations from our network of professionals actively engaged in turnaround efforts across the country. Specifically, we sought to identify school boards that had taken or were taking an active role in turning around not only their lowest-performing schools but also their entire districts.

Requests disseminated through the Center on School Turnaround (CST) network and conversations with colleagues from the National School Boards Association generated a list of potential districts. We then conducted preliminary research to gather data regarding the respective districts' turnaround efforts and confirm the role of their boards. Our goal in conducting the case studies was not to identify a representative sample that could be generalized, but rather, to find information-rich cases that would be of interest to the broader field.

In seeking nominations and subsequently collecting preliminary data, we sought to identify two urban districts and one rural district. Having identified districts with these key characteristics, we scheduled calls with the districts to explain the research and gauge their interest in participating. Results from the calls were combined with preliminary data analysis and a review of board meeting

minutes to determine the best-fit districts. In this series of three case studies, we examined Baboquivari Unified School District (Arizona), New Haven Public Schools (Connecticut), and Wichita Public Schools (Kansas).

Each brief includes a district profile; descriptive information about the broader community and state context; a description of the district's turnaround efforts; an overview of the board's membership, organization, and functions; a discussion of the board's role in the turnaround effort; and key takeaways.

District Data Collection

For this case study of New Haven Public Schools, we conducted interviews with the superintendent, another senior district administrator, three current board members, the president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, and the former mayor. In addition, we attended and observed a routine board meeting in April 2015; reviewed the district's website; analyzed student performance data; and reviewed board meeting agendas, policies, and minutes.

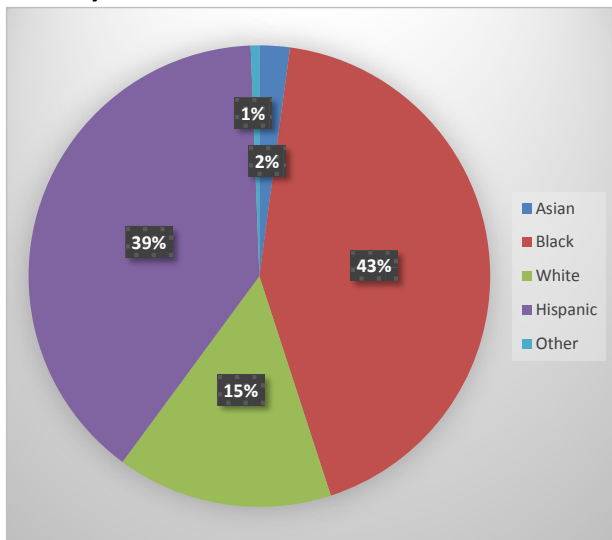
Overview of New Haven Public Schools

New Haven Public Schools is Connecticut’s second largest school district, enrolling just over 21,500 students and managing 50 schools. Superintendent Garth Harries has led the district for the past two years. For the 2014–15 school year, 80 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and 13 percent were identified as eligible for special education. Additional data on the district follows.

Student Demographics

As seen in Figure 1, New Haven is an ethnically and racially diverse community, with almost equal populations of Hispanic and Black students, followed by a smaller population of White students. Asian students and students with “other” racial identifiers make up the remainder of the student body.

Figure 1. 2014–15 Enrollment by Racial/Ethnic Identity



Note: Data collected via the Connecticut Department of Education website and via email communication with New Haven Public Schools.

Student Performance

As demonstrated in Table 1, the attendance rate for New Haven Public Schools has remained relatively consistent over the last four years, and the four-year graduation rate has increased over 11 percentage points. Figures 2 through 7 show that New Haven’s performance on state summative assessments generally follows the state trends and demonstrates closures in the achievement gaps between the district and the state in English

language arts (ELA) and math in grades 5 and 8 and math in grade 10.

Table 1. Attendance and Graduation Rates

	Attendance Rates	4-Year Graduation Rates
2010–11	92.6%	63.9%
2011–12	92.8%	70.9%
2012–13	93.8%	71.4%
2013–14	92.2%	75.4%

Note: Data collected via the Connecticut Department of Education website and via email communication with New Haven Public Schools.

Figure 2. Grade 5 ELA Proficiency Rates

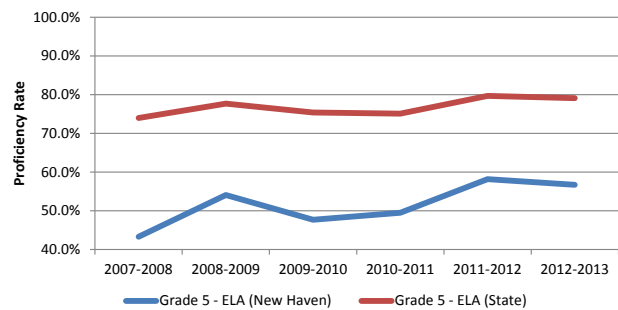


Figure 3. Grade 5 Math Proficiency Rates

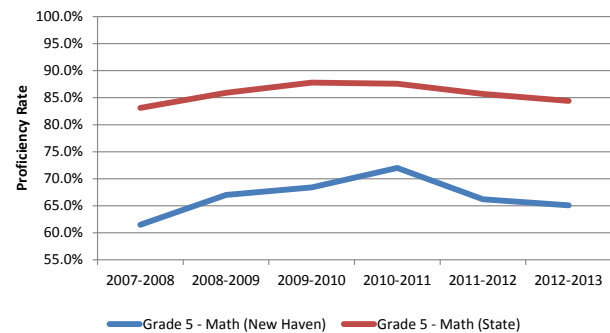


Figure 4. Grade 8 ELA Proficiency Rates

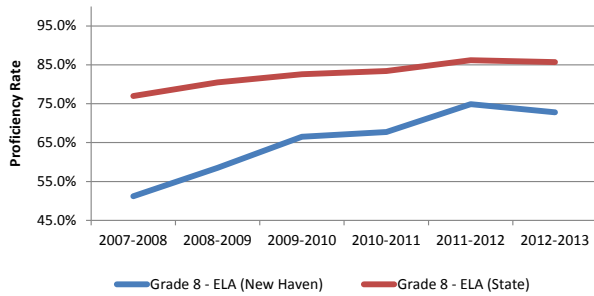


Figure 5. Grade 8 Math Proficiency Rates

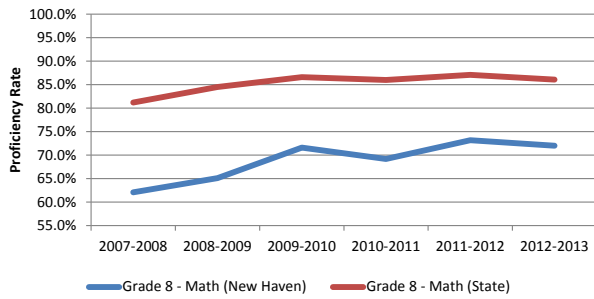


Figure 6. Grade 10 ELA Proficiency Rates

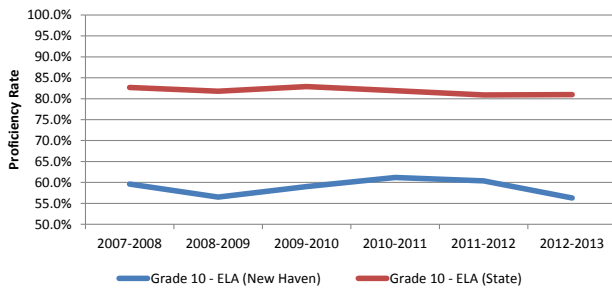
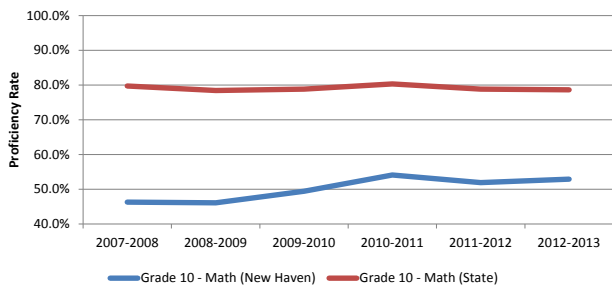


Figure 7. Grade 10 Math Proficiency Rates



School Culture and Climate

Table 2 shows that in-school suspensions have remained relatively consistent over the last four years, with an increase in 2013–14. Out-of-school suspensions have been more volatile with increases and decreases but with a general downward trend, and expulsions slightly decreased over four years.

Table 2. Discipline Trends 2010–11 through 2013–14

	Number of In-School Suspensions	Number of Out-of-School Suspensions	Number of Expulsions
2010–11	696	2669	101
2011–12	720	3198	71
2012–13	700	1974	86
2013–14	750	1780	59

Note: Data collected via the Connecticut Department of Education website and via email communication with New Haven Public Schools.

Turnaround Context for New Haven Public Schools

District and City Leadership

Garth Harries, the current superintendent, began at New Haven Public Schools as the Assistant Superintendent of Portfolio and Performance Management in 2009. Before he came to New Haven, he was the Director of the Small Schools Initiative with the New York City Department of Education. Prior to Superintendent Harries taking the helm of the district in 2013, Superintendent Reginald Mayo led New Haven Public Schools for 21 years. Nearly concurrently, Mayor John DeStefano led the city for 20 years. Upon Mayor DeStefano's retirement, Mayor Toni Harp took office in 2014. The mayor appoints the Board of Education. The board includes several long-standing members, including the most recent Board President, Carlos Torre, a professor of education at Southern Connecticut State University who was Board President throughout the School Change Initiative's implementation.

The consistency of leaders, all focused on education and improving the New Haven schools, was identified as an important factor in the district's improvements. In a 2013 charter revision referendum, New Haven residents voted to create a hybrid Board of Education with two elected positions, in addition to the mayoral appointments. The first election for the two elected seats occurred in November 2015. The referendum also created two non-voting student representative positions.

Inequities

Connecticut has one of the highest concentrations of wealth, along with some of the greatest

wealth disparities in the country (Engel, 2013; Homan, 2011). As demonstrated by Table 3, the city, like most of Connecticut's lower income areas, is surrounded by higher income and less diverse (racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically) towns, which often include high-performing schools and students with high proficiency levels. The disparities between the city of New Haven and the surrounding communities provide important context for the district's improvements.

Internally, identifying differences in how resources are allocated within the district is also a priority, and district administrators recently brought in Education Resource Strategies, a Boston-based nonprofit, to analyze funding inequities for schools within the district.

Yale University

New Haven is home to Yale, one of the country's oldest, most prestigious, and most expensive universities. Yale's presence and idyllic campus provides a stark dichotomy to the realities of New Haven. While the campus is centrally located, it is relatively isolated from the rest of the city. University students tend to populate the central downtown area, while residents of the city utilize restaurants and stores in their neighborhoods. However, the presence of the university does provide a unique opportunity for Yale students to volunteer and work in the community, as well as for local students to benefit from access to the university and the scholars who work and study at Yale and often live in the surrounding towns.

Table 3. Selected Demographics of New Haven and Surrounding Towns

	Home Ownership Rate	Median Income	Living Below Poverty Level	White (alone)	Black or African American (alone)
Connecticut State	67.8%	\$69,461	10.2%	77.6%	10.1%
New Haven	31.1%	\$37,428	26.5%	42.6%	35.4%
North Haven	84.9%	\$86,250	3.9%	89.9%	3.0%
East Haven	56.8%	\$63,673	9.8%	88.5%	2.9%
West Haven	56.8%	\$52,353	11.6%	65.7%	19.6%
Shelton	81.2%	\$86,138	4.7%	90.8%	2.4%

Statistics gathered via State and County Quick Facts, U.S. Census information, retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09/0922980.html>

New Haven Public Schools' Turnaround Efforts

In 2009, Mayor DeStefano and Superintendent Mayo decided that while many strong programs and components were in place in New Haven, the district and the community needed one overarching initiative to focus and ramp up their efforts. New Haven Public Schools launched the School Change Initiative to incorporate all aspects of the prekindergarten to grade 12 education system and guide the district's work. The Board of Education wholeheartedly adopted the initiative. Due to the board's strong acceptance, the School Change Initiative has been maintained and strengthened, despite transitions in both the mayor's and the superintendent's offices.

The School Change Initiative

In interviews, New Haven's district administrators and board members acknowledged that their district serves a population of students with extraordinary needs, but they believed that all students can learn and that the adults in the district must do whatever is needed to mitigate the risks and factors that negatively impact their students. One administrator reflected, "We don't want to just be the best of the urban districts; we want to be the best of all districts. There are things we can't control, but we know kids can learn, and we're here to support them."

In the early 2000s, there was a widespread desire to make changes throughout the district. Yet the mayor and superintendent believed that additional support was required to determine the district's needs and identify solutions. As a result, leaders sought the support of the Stupski Foundation, a nonprofit foundation that specializes in assisting communities to improve the lives of poor and minority children. Stupski came into the district to examine the achievement gap and equity issues. Foundation staff spent a week in the district, completed a full diagnostic analysis, and prepared a report for the district. A district administrator reflected, "We've always looked at low-performing schools, but this report had us focus more on those schools. The findings also connected to accountability, looking at behavior and culture data, and then making changes based on the needs. This report, coupled with the political will of the mayor and the superintendent, laid the foundation for the School Change Initiative."

The president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers was also an integral part of the development of the School Change Initiative and the implementation of several components of the work. He described the initiative as a top to bottom change. He stated:

It includes everyone from the mayor's office, [New Haven Public Schools], the teachers' union, and down to the classroom. It's designed to be a self-reflective process to target the things that need to change. The initiative is not demonizing, but the reality was that we had to take a hard, honest look at what we were doing. Our students were underperforming, and we had to stop kicking the can. The School Change Initiative forced us to stop kicking [the can], to identify the things we can fix. There's work we needed to do on our side of the fence, but there was work to do on the district's side as well. The top-to-bottom accountability changed how we did things.

The shift in mindset and collaborative approach to addressing the low performance of students acted as the base of the School Change Initiative, but it was supported by several additional practice, policy, and resource allocation changes from the district. The district revamped monitoring protocols by holding monthly meetings to assess how individual schools were doing and then connected district supports and services to the schools. The district also forged partnerships with local higher education institutions, including Yale University, Southern Connecticut State University, and the University of New Haven, to create professional development opportunities for district teachers. One such partnership is the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, a program through which teachers participate in educational seminars led by Yale faculty members and then write innovative lesson plans that are catalogued online and available to teachers across the country for implementation in the classroom.

In addition, the district and the board worked together and acquired significant capital improvement funds from the state of Connecticut to renovate the schools. The district utilized a rarely used

state policy that stated that Connecticut would refund capital renovations. Over the last 16 years, approximately \$1.5 billion in state funds were used to renovate 46 of New Haven's 50 schools. School construction grants from the state covered the majority of the projects' costs. Recent renovations focused on updating technology systems and using green construction materials. The district is currently working to allocate funds for the remaining four schools.

The School Change Initiative was recently updated to reflect the district's changing needs, new priorities, and updated goals (Lipps, 2015). Called School Change 2.0, the plan includes additional components related to student social-emotional growth, analysis of data that acts as an early warning system for at-risk students, and expansion of the portfolio approach to school management (School Change 2.0, 2015).

School Tiers and Differentiated Supports

A key component of the School Change Initiative was placing schools into tiers and providing differentiated supports based on those tiers. In 2009, with encouragement from the mayor's office, the district began analyzing and identifying the performance level of individual schools. From 2009 to 2013, the district assigned one of three ratings to all schools based on student achievement, growth, and climate data. Superintendent Harries reflected, "The [assignment of tiers] wasn't just about the performance of schools, but it was about the situational context for those schools—how were we addressing some of the needs of these schools? The most important outcome of the [assignment] process was the actions that came out of the ratings, such as the school's own self-reflection and the board's and district's actions to support those buildings."

Placing schools in tiers required careful communication from the district and the board with the local school communities about how the tiers were determined and what the ratings meant. The board and the district then needed to support the schools with the lowest ratings. For schools in Tier 3 (lowest performing and highest need), the district employed a range of strategies, including hiring new administrators; bringing in new staff as needed; providing additional wraparound services for students; and, in some cases, offering activities for students in school buildings until 5:00 p.m.

A board member reflected on the practice, "[Assigning schools to tiers] allowed us to quickly categorize what was going on in schools, quickly focus on those needs, and then make decisions to get resources into buildings and make the personnel changes that were necessary."

In most cases, the schools in the lowest-performing tier aligned with the state-defined priority and focus lists. However, a district administrator noted that some of the schools the state identified were making improvements, while other schools that the state did not identify as priority were ranked as Tier 3 schools by the district and required significant additional supports. Schools identified as Tier 3 by the district and as priority schools by the state received additional supports from the district and access to federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars if they implemented one of the federal turnaround models. Some of those resources from the district and the SIG funding supported the creation of theme-based magnet programs, project-based learning approaches, and additional time for staff collaboration.

While board members and district administrators felt the tiered ratings were useful, the district stopped ranking the schools by tiers in 2013 and shifted to a balanced progress report, sometimes referred to as a balanced score card. A board member commented, "None of us planned to use tiers forever. We discussed how far tiers would take us and if there was some other approach to take us to the next step." Superintendent Harries commented that the "ratings were becoming a distraction because the tool [for determining the rankings] was too blunt, and it didn't address some of the individual needs of schools. New Haven's new balanced progress report is a more nuanced tool that reflects the individual needs of a school, utilizes additional data points collected by the district, is a more refined approach to differentiation, and is a central part of the recent revisions made to the School Change Initiative."

Moving forward, district administrators believe that the balanced progress reports will provide a strong foundation for identifying school needs. They also stress the importance of strengthening district support to schools, including help in attaining more financial resources to fund additional time (for extended day, extended year, and professional development) and innovative

learning approaches. Additional analysis is also needed to monitor improvements in the highest-need schools (previously identified as Tier 3) and to compare those that received SIG funds and implemented the SIG program with those that did not.

Suburban/Urban Exchange for Magnet Schools

In 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled in *Sheff v. O'Neill* that the state was responsible for providing equal education to all students in the state regardless of race, ethnicity, or district boundaries. In response to the ruling, the state legislature passed new legislation encouraging voluntary racial integration of schools. As one of the more impoverished and racially isolated communities in the state, New Haven developed

a number of magnet schools and a suburban/urban exchange with the surrounding communities to increase racial integration. A board member estimated that currently 3,500 suburban students are now enrolled in New Haven's magnet schools, and more suburban students are on a waitlist for a seat. Over 7,000 students are enrolled in over 20 magnet programs throughout the district. Admission for New Haven students is granted by a lottery application with preference provided if the school is in the student's neighborhood and if siblings attend the school. Some of the magnet programs include health and sciences, agriculture and aquaculture, business, performing arts, international, humanities, and law and justice. The expansion of the magnet program was part of the School Change Initiative.

Overview of New Haven Public Schools Board of Education

New Haven's board has eight members, including the mayor. The mayor appoints members to four-year terms. Board members elect officer positions for a one-year term. Board members are limited to serving 12 consecutive years but may return to the board after two years off. As described previously, the board structure changed in fall 2015; two outgoing members were not replaced by the mayor but were elected by voters. The shift to an elected/appointed hybrid model is an effort by city leaders to increase public transparency and decrease the appearance of the board rubber-stamping the mayor's agenda.

In the past, the Board of Education was reportedly rather dysfunctional. Torre, the current board president, reflected:

During my first one-and-a-half years on the board, we never had a quorum. We had to call people to get votes in; some members didn't come to meetings. At meetings, board members that did come passed notes and giggled in the middle of meetings, in front of the public. There was a lack of leadership, partly because the then-mayor was running for governor. As a result, there was no focus on the board.

When Mayor DeStefano took office, he appointed strong community leaders to the board, including several educators. A board member commented on the mayor's thoroughness of vetting potential members, saying, "The mayor wanted to make sure that the people coming on the board were serious about what they were doing, not that they were of the same mind, but that they [wanted to be on the board] for the right reasons."

With the new mayor's strong interest in getting the district on the right track and carefully appointing members, the board gradually turned over enough members to create a critical mass of reform-oriented community leaders who wanted to see changes in both the district's and the board's professionalism. In addition, Board President Torre was characterized as committed to leading a high-functioning board with members

who were prepared to act and hold each other accountable. As board president, he has brought operations and education leaders to the board to improve district practice and policy. A district administrator commented that Torre "has really taken more of a lead in how a school board can better work with a district, and he's brought in CABA [Connecticut Association of Boards of Education] for board workshops. I see his role as trying to find out what the next steps are that the board needs [to take] to support us, as a district, better." District administrators and board members acknowledged that there are ways to improve board functionality and that all are willing to make changes to improve. The board recently underwent a significant change in committee structure that is described in a later section.

Board members reflected on a general openness with each other. One member commented, "We like each other enough that even when I'm against [someone else's] ideas, I'll try to have a civil conversation or debate." If necessary, these conversations often occur outside of public settings, and board meetings remain cordial and on-topic. Another member reflected, "We respect each other; we realize that every one of us is a professional and has a deep love of education. Regardless of my ideas being contrary to yours, I don't question that your ideas are coming from the best interest for the students."

Political party affiliations are not relevant in board relations, and several board members reflected that they do not know which political parties other board members belong to because political beliefs do not enter the board discussions or decisions. Despite this belief amongst board members, the fact that the decisions are usually made via consensus has increased the perception that the board is a rubber stamp to the mayor's agenda. Recently, the board voted against a proposed partnership with a local charter school organization that drew strong opposition from the local community. Dave Cicarella, president of the teachers' union, commented, "I thought that they were a rubber stamp for the mayor, but to see them dig in and push back on the charter issue

really changed perceptions, and it was refreshing....This decision was a stark change from the past.” Board members noted that while they would have liked to approve the charter school partnership and the organizers’ proposal to focus on trauma issues, concerns about the plan as well as questions about the proposal process led them to vote against the project. Board members hoped that decisions, such as the vote against the charter school project, which they indicated was based on facts and a desire to serve the best interests of students, as well as the upcoming change to an elected/appointed hybrid structure, will help them regain the community’s trust.

Superintendent Harries acknowledged the board’s strengths by noting its significant and varied expertise. He reflected that the board members have a “useful mosaic of skills and

perspectives.” In addition, he identified two factors that impact the board’s functionality:

[First, this board] is not a political board. Members are not there to make names for themselves. They are on the board because they believe in the district and making a change. Second, they each have independent connections to what’s going on in education. It’s not a board that starts at zero on any topic. Some of the members are more reform oriented; some are more establishment oriented. They have a pretty broad range of perspectives, but they are all part of the board for the right reasons.

Superintendent Harries recognized the rarity of his board and understood that its strengths positively impact his ability to run the district and make improvements.

Role of New Haven Public Schools Board of Education in Turnaround Efforts

Board members defined two primary roles for themselves: (1) hire a superintendent and hold him or her accountable, and (2) develop and enforce policies and procedures for the district. All board members interviewed expressed a commitment to hiring a competent and strong superintendent and not micromanaging the district. The former mayor and superintendent spearheaded the School Change Initiative, but the board played an integral role in enacting policies, guiding the district, and staying focused on the implementation of the collective vision. The board also recruited and hired a new superintendent to continue and enhance the School Change Initiative. In reflecting about the board's role in the current turnaround efforts, district representatives, board members, and community leaders articulated several specific actions that they proposed supported the efforts, including the following:

- Providing an increased focus on teaching and learning
- Implementing revised board committee structures
- Revising the teachers' contract
- Expanding community engagement
- Establishing a strong relationship with the superintendent
- Supporting implementation via policy
- Enhancing the role of monitoring and acting as critical friends

Providing an Increased Focus on Teaching and Learning

The district and the board have worked together to identify ways to increase the board's functionality over time. Superintendent Harries reflected on past changes and current work:

The district is [currently] working with the board to explore questions of governance and to adjust the board structures to reflect the needs of both the board and the district. [Back] in 2009, we changed the structures at the board meetings to discuss turnaround [assigning schools to tiers] and how to better

support our schools. There's been a growing hunger from the board to have deeper discussions on teaching and learning.

The revised board committee structure and regular presentations that align to the School Change Initiative reflect the board's desire to have access to more data, detail, and updates on the supports and interventions occurring in schools.

Implementing Revised Board Committee Structures

Another significant change started in 2014 with a shift in committee structures. Previously, two board committees existed: Curriculum and Instruction, and Finance and Operations. However, the board wanted to expand its overall financial oversight and efficacy, which included connecting the budget to programs, increasing the board's role in monitoring and understanding real substantive issues, and hiring a chief financial officer. To achieve this, the board transitioned into two new committees and retained one former committee. The first committee, Governance, meets once a month to set the board's agenda, consider policy changes, monitor progress from past board meetings, and maintain general oversight of the district's work. The second committee, Teaching and Learning, meets once a month and dives into deeper academic and wraparound support issues. Finance and Operations remains a committee.

To ensure that the committee members receive quality and in-depth information, the board invites district administrators, school-level staff, and key partners to present on topics of interest and explore how the district could better serve its students. Board members and district administrators claim that the revised structure is helpful and allows board members the chance to delve deeper into the real issues and practices taking place in schools.

Revising the Teachers' Contract

While the teachers' contract is typically negotiated by the teachers' union and district representatives, the board adopts it. In conjunction with the changes in the district and city leadership, a new union president, Cicarella, came into office in 2006

and desired to strengthen the role the union played in improving education. Once the board started actively working with additional community stakeholders, it also encouraged civil and productive contract negotiations with the teachers' union. One board member reflected that, at first, the board "grudgingly let the union president into the fold, but within a few months, there were fantastic ideas coming from the union." The teachers' union took the lead on developing a new contract in 2010 and proactively worked with the district and the board to create a new teacher evaluation system (TEVAL), which became a key component of the School Change Initiative. In 2014, the union and board negotiated a second contract, which included altered working conditions for the district's lowest-performing schools, such as adjusted school time, modified work rules, and flexibilities in staffing.

TEVAL includes a provision which states that if a teacher is identified early in the school year as "needs improvement," that teacher will receive intensive supports and coaching in the coming months to help improve his or her practice. Many teachers have taken this opportunity to strengthen their classroom instruction and have ended the school year with a rating of effective or higher. However, if that teacher does not improve or does not show potential for improvement, he or she is terminated from the district. One board member reflected on the success of TEVAL:

We've let go over 100 tenured teachers over four years with little controversy or media coverage. There's the possibility of one person protesting the ruling, but if that happens, it'll be the first and only protest. The teachers realize that the union is not going to protect them, because the decisions are based on the instrument [the union] created. The system is not something that [the board] imposed on [the teachers] but is something [the teachers' union] designed.

Once the district started using the TEVAL process, additional companion evaluation systems were created to address other educators throughout the system, such as principals and administrators.

The board and the teachers' union maintain respect for each other. A board member commented, "On the board, we've bent over backwards to make sure that we've complied with what we promised [we would do], and the [teachers']

union has done the same." The teachers' union mostly communicates with the board via the superintendent and provides statements (as needed) during the public comment section of board meetings, but, as stated by the president of the teachers' union, there is a desire for the union to work more closely with the board—helping to think through some of the big issues the district still needs to address.

Expanding Community Engagement

While launching the School Change Initiative, the board led the community engagement efforts to communicate the plan and what it meant for the schools and the community. One board member reflected, "One of the things that we learned is that you can't shove anything down anyone's throat, even if you know what you're doing is right. There will be a standoff, and it'll be a downward spiral if you start off on the wrong foot. We did [community engagement] in such a way that the board, the unions, parents, community, and district could all ask, 'What are the things that we really need to do, and how do we do it together?'"

Close collaboration with the teachers' union on the contracts and evaluation system demonstrated to other stakeholders that the board and the district wanted to work together to identify issues and solve problems. Superintendent Harries identified that this approach of "no-fault problem solving" was one of the board's and the district's core beliefs and values. He commented, "The board enables the conditions for what we know is political and volatile work, and they do it collaboratively. They [find ways now] and will continue to find ways to have constructive conversations without getting paralyzed by context, politics, or personal agendas."

Establishing a Strong Relationship with the Superintendent

All board members interviewed noted their close relationship with the current and former superintendent as crucial to their success. One board member reflected, "We hired the current superintendent, so we feel responsible for his success....We appointed him; it's our failure if he fails." Several communication mechanisms are in place to connect the board members to the superintendent, including the following:

- Superintendent Harries and Board President Torre speak two to three times a week to

discuss issues at hand and to set the agenda for the board meetings.

- District administrators have input into the board agenda by alerting Superintendent Harries to upcoming issues that may require the board's involvement.
- Superintendent Harries meets in person or speaks via phone with each board member regularly (i.e., once every two weeks) to check in, keep them abreast of issues, and answer their questions.
- Board President Torre meets with and communicates regularly with each board member to keep tabs on their questions or issues that they may be concerned about.
- The district provides extensive materials to board members in preparation for the board meetings and presents information on relevant topics at the twice-monthly board meetings.

Supporting Implementation via Policy

New Haven Public Schools strives to create structures to support the schools identified as low performing and not to perpetuate a cycle of blame. The district leadership team and board members recognize that they must work together to improve their schools. The district provides the supports and services, but the board sets the policies that govern those supports, and schools have a great deal of flexibility in how they implement policies at the building level. District administrators work with the board to sort through the various local, state, and federal identifications and funding sources (e.g., Commissioner's Network, School Improvement Grants) to develop meaningful supports and interventions for the schools. Superintendent Harries commented, "I'm a great believer that school turnaround is in the magic of implementation. The board creates urgency and flexible tools for implementation. Together, we need to figure out what's needed in New Haven and then adapt the federal and state programs and requirements to meet our needs."

Enhancing the Role of Monitoring and Acting as Critical Friends

The board not only sets the policies but also monitors school progress and offers feedback to the district. To create a formal progress monitoring mechanism, once the district started identifying

schools via tiers, district administrators worked with schools identified as Tier 3 to prepare information for the board on a regular basis. Each school's leadership team presentation would include an overview of what the school's plan was, what progress had been made on the plan, and the next steps to continue efforts or make midcourse corrections. A district administrator reflected, "The board knows the schools well and what's going on in buildings. They are aware of the processes and supports the district provides. They are heavily involved in everything we're doing."

Several New Haven board members articulated that they act as critical friends to the district. District administrators and the superintendent also noted that a board member at a recent board meeting stated, "It's our job to push you." The district administrator added, "With this board, you never feel like it's an 'I gotcha.' It's more about how can the board support us at the district, and how can they gather community support. You don't want all the members to agree all the time, but you want the board members to support the district, and [you don't want to] feel that they are out to get you or penalize you."

Key Takeaways

Several key takeaways emerged from the interviews, site visit, and research on New Haven Public Schools. These key takeaways are described in this section and may be used by other local school boards to inform their practices and relationships with the districts.

- **Recruit qualified members.** If the board is appointed, the mayor should recruit and appoint community members who not only bring a variety of skills to the board but also believe in serving the district.
- **Maintain a priority on students.** The board needs to make the right decisions for students. If board members are appointed, the decision-making process should be transparent and show that due diligence is followed. Decisions should always reflect the district's needs.
- **Remain politically neutral.** Political parties are irrelevant to the ability of a school board member to do his or her job. Political beliefs and party conflicts should be kept away from board decisions.
- **Hire competent district staff.** The board needs to hire good district- and school-level administrators and ensure that there are competent staff to step in when vacancies occur. Making good hires is one of the primary roles of a board and is imperative to a district's success.
- **Design flexible policies.** The board can set policies and standards, but it should allow schools flexibility in implementing policies to meet their individual needs and closely monitor the actions to ensure fidelity of implementation.
- **Understand roles.** A board should hire a strong superintendent and let him or her lead the district. In addition, if something is working well in the district, the board should leave it alone. If something is not working, the board and the district are responsible for finding out why it is not working and how to make changes. Implementing clear structures and having clear communication processes enable the district and the board to problem solve quickly and efficiently.
- **Keep improving.** Just as schools and districts change over time, the board must be willing to reflect on its own practices and processes and to make changes to better serve the district. The board should bring in external consultants, hold workshops, evaluate its functions, and change processes and structures.

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