

# Urban Interventions

## When a university tries to help a city school

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Once upon a time, the relationship of Boston universities to the city's school system was simply to accept worthy candidates into the freshman class and produce a few dozen new teachers each year to fill staff vacancies. When did this change, and what are the new expectations of colleges and universities?

For the past five decades, I have had a chance to observe university-city relations from several perspectives, as a Harvard and Boston University professor, as a state secretary of education and a senior fellow at the New England Board of Higher Education, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the research and consulting firm Eduventures.

One chapter in my recent book *Reforming Boston Schools 1930-2006* deals with university efforts to improve city schools. Other chapters analyze the efforts of corporations, foundations, civil rights groups, unions and others on the chessboard of educational reform and improvement.

For many decades, universities stayed away from Boston schools. Boston trained its elementary teachers at its own normal school, which became Boston State College and eventually was taken over by the University of Massachusetts Boston. In prior centuries, Harvard College produced the largest number of high school "masters" but beginning in the 1930s, Boston College, Tufts and others sent graduates to teach in Boston.

What lured area universities into Boston was the new commitment to cities in the 1960s, first by the Ford Foundation and then by Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and Congressional approval of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, precursor to No Child Left Behind. Universities were asked to help revise the curriculum, design new models, advise on racial integration and improve specialized services to city children.

This was not easy for city school administrators who bridled at public criticism by university professors. City school principals did not always accept the wisdom of faculty who lived in suburbs and appeared to look down on lifelong city dwellers. Boston College early on enjoyed great credibility and in 1967 hosted a study by education deans of ways to modernize the evaluation and selection of principals and headmasters.

Boston University under its president, John Silber, offered on three occasions to take over the management of Boston public schools. Silber asked former Brookline Superintendent Robert Sperber to lead a Higher Education

Partnership with Boston and establish a Boston Leadership Academy with both school of education and school of management faculty. BU contributed four scholarships each year for top graduates of 17 city high schools as part of a commitment to the city.

Northeastern University partnered with several Boston public schools and during one of the city school system's periodic financial crises prepared a report on how to find \$20 million in savings. UMass Boston for several decades worked with Dorchester High School. In all, more than 30 colleges and universities in Eastern Massachusetts agreed to become partners with the Boston schools for teacher training, research, enrichment and other special projects.

The Harvard University partnership with Roxbury High School was among the first to founder, since too few South Bostonians would attend an all black school under court-ordered desegregation. Harvard soon after welcomed Boston administrators to its Principals' Center. Harvard subsequently led senior faculty to help devise ways to better analyze student achievement data and help instructional leadership teams. Eventually, Harvard's faculty included no fewer than seven individuals who had worked in Boston schools for part of their careers.

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The MIT partnership with the Umana School (East Boston) lasted a few years, but did not survive a mix-up in expectations and the loss of technology equipment. MIT deans and faculty launched more than a dozen projects, many in science and technology, to raise the aspirations of city students.

BU in 1988 assumed responsibilities for the public schools of Chelsea, Mass., which abuts Boston, and developed early childhood programs, selected a series of superintendents and substantially raised SAT and other achievement scores. Boston College formed close partnerships with Boston's Brighton High School and many nearby elementary schools. In recent years, BC expanded these links by adding access to health and social services needed by the children and their family as a prerequisite to success in school.

In Massachusetts and elsewhere, universities are often seen as vendors of expertise. The hope, especially in New York City, East Palo Alto and other cities, is that universities can become “turnaround agents” and rescue underperforming public schools. This is a genuine challenge, since universities are stocked with very independent faculty members with a mix of teaching, student advising and research responsibilities. Many faculty, until recent years, lacked school experience dealing with the challenges of urban diversity. Some schools of education and management will be able to respond, but universities are usually better at taking on specific tasks rather than total school reinventions.

Another weakness of universities is the shortfall of graduates in critical areas such as science and mathematics and the teaching of students for whom English is a new language. This is one of the reasons Teach for America and several teacher-residency programs have generated strong support in cities such as Boston, Chicago and Denver. So far, these programs have attracted high-achieving college graduates who had been unwilling to enroll in school of education programs.

Universities contributed thousands of hours to trying to help Boston schools improve. With what effect? When he became Boston superintendent in 1995, Thomas

Payzant found too many isolated interventions that did not raise student achievement scores. He criticized “projectitis” and asked colleges to work in concert with his Whole School Improvement projects school by school. Steve Leonard, turnaround headmaster at the Jeremiah Burke High School, dismissed his “too many partners” and invited several universities to help with very focused assignments essential to school improvement.

University partnerships must include a clear statement of objectives, mutual respect among university and city partners, a major commitment to stay many years (as BU did in Chelsea), and a willingness to evaluate and revise ineffective strategies. Boston Mayor Tom Menino in 2007 asked five of the city’s largest universities each to commit resources to two underperforming schools in Boston to help raise student and school performance. Soon, it should be clear which universities have found the key to effective school-system partnerships.

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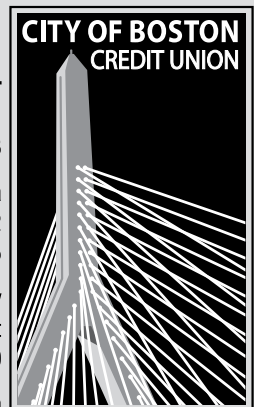
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