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5 lessons as urban school district reform continues

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Despite decades of reform initiatives, school districts struggle with a significant achievement gap between children from low-income households vs. middle-class and affluent children.

Socio-demographics are the most powerful predictors of a school district's academic success. Some education experts have an analogy involving growing corn in Iowa vs. the desert: Even if the seeds are the same, the differing environments result in starkly different outcomes, no matter how skilled the farmer.

The challenges are especially acute in America's urban districts, partly because of the concentrated poverty in inner cities, partly because of the large populations served by big urban districts, and partly because of how urban revitalization is helped or hindered by the quality of neighborhood schools.

The best strategy to improve outcomes for low-income children is economic integration — an option largely off the table in most communities because of housing patterns.

"It's incredible, when you look at the research, that when you put an (economically disadvantaged) kid in a middle-class school, within three to five years, they're doing just as well as kids from that community," said Amber Arellano, who just stepped down as CEO of EdTrust Midwest, a think tank based in Detroit. "They're getting a way richer curriculum and more advanced coursework. They're getting more opportunities for acceleration. They're getting tutoring if they get behind or if they have a learning disability. There are just more supports."

Reformers have come to learn there are no quick fixes. But there are strategies that can move the needle, experts say.

Among the lessons learned:

The importance of leadership

“Leadership matters,” said James Moore, an Ohio State University expert in urban education. “If there’s anything we’ve learned it’s that it is important we choose the right leaders and give the leaders the support to carry out the work.”

For school superintendents, the trick is handling everyday crises as well as developing long-term vision. The latter requires identifying a district’s problem areas, crafting a strategy to address those and doing the hard work of implementation.

“It’s an incredibly difficult job,” said Amber Humm Patnode, acting director of Proving Ground, part of Harvard University’s Center for Education Policy Research. “It’s walking that fine line of accountability while recognizing the challenges” faced by staff, students and parents.

Principals can make or break a school. “I've seen too many good schools that once the principal leaves, they don't have a good succession plan and the school struggles and teachers leave,” said Hal Woods, policy director for Kids First Chicago. “It happens everywhere.”

Leadership at the state level also matters, Humm Patnode said. “Anytime you have a state making a unified, coordinated effort to support school districts, provide resources and professional learning and bring districts together to create new communities — that really helps build momentum and move districts forward.”

As examples, she cited Ohio’s statewide initiatives on reducing absenteeism and Illinois’ efforts on adopting a statewide approach to promote continuous improvement in academic outcomes.

The importance of teachers

Teachers are big factors who impact student success, according to research by a professor at Melbourne University. The key is having an instructor who makes students excited about learning.

That means hiring and retaining skilled teachers should be a top priority for any district — and especially in a high-poverty district where students are most in need of quality instruction. Yet that’s a challenge in urban districts where the job is more challenging and suburban districts may pay more.

“Teachers are such an integral piece of the system,” Humm Patnode said. “You have to have effective teachers. You have to attract talent and retain them, so that investment (in teachers) is critical.”

Detroit and Chicago are among the districts raising teacher pay. Detroit Public Schools Community District now has the highest starting pay for a new teacher in metro Detroit, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti says. This spring, Chicago Public Schools approved a contract that will raise the average teacher pay from $86,439 to $114,429 by 2028.

Using data to promote continuous improvement

Successful superintendents take "a continuous improvement approach," Humm Patnode said. "That's the mindset of using data to identify the challenges, then a root-cause analysis to understand the reasons or contributors and then relying on evidence-based practices to apply strategies to move the needle."

It also means using data to see if those strategies are working, she added: "Did it have the impact we thought it would have? If not, did we implement it the way we intended and, if not, can we tighten that up? And if it really was the best we could do, is it the right strategy?

"I think the piece that often gets lost is that we're really good at trying new strategies, but we're not always good at attending to implementation and monitoring the impact — and, if something isn't working, investigating why versus just abandoning things."

The need for community partners

School districts need help addressing the range of socioeconomic issues that face low-income children, such as lack of access to mental health services or dental care, unstable housing situations, unsafe neighborhoods that make it dangerous to walk to school or wait at a bus stop or parental abuse or neglect.

"Schools and districts can't solve these issues on their own," Humm Patnode said. "We really have to think about how to leverage community partnerships."

Have realistic expectations and give reform efforts time

The issues facing urban districts "didn't happen overnight and we can't expect to see incredible improvements or, quote unquote, a 'fix' overnight either," Humm Patnode said.

A big issue in education is "did we give it enough time?" she said. "If we're monitoring and we're seeing gains, we should keep with it. But sometimes, we have the tendency to abandon things because we're not monitoring," the gains are not readily apparent, and "so it's, like, well, let's just go on to the next thing."

It doesn't help that the average tenure of a superintendent of a big urban district is only 2.7 years, according to a recent survey by the Council of the Great City Schools.

Typically, leadership changes at the top tend to stall or derail momentum of reform efforts, particularly if the new leader goes in a new direction, Humm Patnode said.

Moore agreed. Systemic reform “takes time and most of us don’t have the patience for it,” he said.

Yet the work is important, he said: “In theory, we say everyone deserves an education. But we have to make a commitment that everybody deserves a quality education.”