

COMMUNITY DEVELOPERS' GUIDE TO IMPROVING SCHOOLS IN REVITALIZING NEIGHBORHOODS

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Enterprise Community Partners is grateful to Capital One for its financial support of the Community Development and Schools Collaborative. Together with Abt Associates, Inc., one of the nation's premier research and consulting firms, Enterprise has brought together the best community developers currently working on projects linking neighborhood improvement to school improvement. This will provide an opportunity for leaders of these efforts to learn from each other and see the lessons of their work used to create a national agenda.

This is the second of three reports.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
I. Finding the Right School Improvement Strategy	3
II. Assembling a Strong Sponsor Team	9
III. Elements of Successful Schools	13
IV. Supporting School Improvement.....	17
V. Conclusion.....	19



Introduction

Community developers have long recognized that good public elementary schools are the essential ingredient for the prosperity of most neighborhoods over the long term. Large-scale investment in housing redevelopment can do little to affect inter-generational poverty if children are not given the knowledge and skills to compete in the workforce. In addition, neighborhoods lacking good schools have trouble retaining families with school-aged children if those families have choices about where to live. As a result, poorly performing public schools may accelerate neighborhood decline by hindering the preservation or creation of stable residential communities.

Despite these obvious linkages between the health of neighborhoods and the quality of the local schools, community revitalization efforts usually do not include schools. This is beginning to change. In the past 15 years, in cities all over the United States, developers, foundations, and other investors who are committed to neighborhood revitalization have made school improvement part of their agenda.

This paper distills lessons from community development practitioners working on school improvement efforts in 12 low-income urban neighborhoods across the country. We interviewed approximately 40 community development practitioners, funders, and educators, and visited five cities. We sought to understand how community developers and others outside the school system can most effectively advocate for high-quality public schools in low-income urban neighborhoods that are undergoing revitalization. We focused on public elementary schools. Their enrollment zones are typically neighborhood-based and thus have the strongest relationship to a neighborhood's composition. In order to ensure open and candid conversations with those we interviewed, we determined not to use real names of the schools, neighborhoods, and cities in the examples we cite in this paper.

Our research suggests that successful school-centered community development does not depend on a particular school reform model. We found successful models for individual schools both inside and outside the traditional public school system. We also found them both in high-performing, reform-minded school districts and in those that were poorly performing and resistant to change.

In the past 15 years, in cities all over the United States, developers, foundations, and other investors who are committed to neighborhood revitalization have made school improvement part of their agenda.

The common thread uniting these successful yet diverse approaches was the outside sponsor's sustained commitment to school improvement in three core areas:

1. Principal and teacher quality
2. Curriculum
3. Early childhood education

These core areas are also those that the research literature suggests are essential for improving academic outcomes for elementary school children.¹

This paper speaks to real estate developers, foundations, universities, and other community developers. It describes how to be an effective advocate for individual school change as an outsider to the school system, but one with a long-term interest in the neighborhood. It is not intended to contribute to the dialogue about how best to achieve systemic school reform. Effecting system-wide change is the province of school superintendents and mayors. What a community developer or other outsider to the school system can bring to the table is a long-term investment in a particular neighborhood, and, by extension, its school.

We found that a variety of school improvement strategies can be successful, provided:

- They are tailored to the specific needs of the neighborhood and school;
- They are grounded in the realities of the local school-reform environment; and
- They have the tools to create substantial improvement in the core areas of principal and teacher quality, curriculum, and early childhood education.

This paper provides guidance on how to get there.

¹ For teacher quality, see Eide, E., Goldhaber, D., & Brewer, D. 2004, The teacher labour market and teacher quality, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 20(2): 230-244. For principal quality, see Baker, B., Cooper, B., 2005, Do principals with stronger academic backgrounds hire better teachers? Policy implications for improving high-poverty schools, *Educational Administration Quarterly* 41(3): 449-479. For preschools, see Duncan, G., Ludwig, J., & Magnuson, K. 2007, Reducing poverty through preschool interventions. *Future of Children* 17(2): 143-160. For curriculum, see Borman et al., 2003, Comprehensive school reform and achievement: A meta-analysis, *Review of Educational Research* 73(2): 125-130.

I. Finding the Right School Improvement Strategy

Among the 12 neighborhoods studied for this paper, we found no standard approach to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for neighborhood children. Yet all sponsors pushed for substantial change—either by creating a new charter or traditional public school or by working to reconstitute an existing school (a process of disbanding the faculty and reopening with new staff, structure, and curriculum). Some achieved substantial change relatively quickly while others did so incrementally, by helping the school research curricula options, funding professional development, and pressing for turnover of under-performing teachers.

The most effective school and neighborhood improvement strategies were built on a clear understanding of conditions at the school and in the school district and the conditions in the neighborhood. They also depended on the type of outside sponsor available to lead the school initiative. Our research suggests that these factors determine the scope of potential approaches to school improvement that will be most effective for improving educational outcomes. Therefore, as a leader of a neighborhood revitalization who is interested in improving the quality of the schools in the neighborhood, your first step should be to engage in a careful analysis of the following:

- School conditions;
- School district conditions;
- Neighborhood conditions; and
- Type of sponsor and what the sponsor(s) can bring to the effort.

What to Consider in Choosing a School Improvement Strategy

School Conditions

A successful partnership with a pre-existing school generally results from fulfilling what school administrators perceive as a need. Even if you wish to create an entirely new school (either charter or traditional) as part of the neighborhood revitalization, you will need to understand the performance of the existing school in the neighborhood to make the case that a new school is needed. For example, overcrowding in the existing school or low enrollment due to its poor reputation may underscore the need for a new school in the community.

Anticipating a school's needs first requires understanding its incentives and mandates (e.g., Adequate Yearly Progress goals) and then identifying gaps in services that hinder meeting those ends. Important questions to ask about the school include:

- Does the school have a well-respected principal who can embrace and lead a far-reaching school improvement?
- Where does the school's academic performance rank in the district and what is its reputation?
- What organizational, curricular, and performance mandates has the district required the school to meet and in what timeframe?
- Is there a projected increase or decrease in student enrollment over the next five years that will substantively affect staffing and funding levels?
- What neighborhoods do the attending students come from?

- What is the condition of the school facility, and when is the school scheduled to be renovated according to the school district’s capital plan?
- Are there outside partners already working with the school, and what are they doing? Where could the school benefit from additional partnerships?
- Is there an active parent association or parent council? Does it monitor the academic performance of the school and push for improvements?
- Does the school have a stated goal to excel in non-academic areas such as technology, sport programs, or other extra-curricular activities? What resources are available to support that goal?

Researching these questions will give you important information about the school’s strengths and weaknesses. A well-respected principal, for instance, is a key strength that can attract volunteers and donations from area employers. Understanding weaknesses is also important. A school performing at the bottom of the district, for example, may rally the district and area investors to devote significant resources and time to the school.

School District Conditions

A full understanding of a school’s assets also requires mapping the academic, political, and financial dimensions of the school district. Schools operate within a highly centralized system in which the school district determines the school’s funding, staffing policies, and (sometimes) curricular choices. Any attempt to effect changes in teaching staff, for example, will require an understanding of local teachers’ union policies as well as district policies about the principal’s ability to transfer or dismiss teachers. Because a school’s funding is most often dictated by the number of full-time enrolled students, it is also essential to know how the district allocates federal, state, and local funding to its schools for operating and capital costs. State laws dictate charter school formation, and they typically do not provide public funding for school capital costs.

Broadly speaking, the district superintendent determines how much latitude a principal possesses to enter into a partnership with an outside entity. A successful, long-term partnership with a school may therefore depend on an understanding of the superintendent’s reform agenda, tenure, and relationship with the school board that votes on her proposals. If, for example, a superintendent requires all schools in the district to choose and implement one of a set of school reform models, this creates an opportunity for an outside partner to help a principal choose and implement its reform model.

(If an outside partner wants to help a school implement a different curriculum, the partner would likely need to obtain special permission from the school district.) To the extent that the mayor controls or influences the

What incentives might a school district have to support an elementary school improvement effort driven by an outside entity?

The school district has obtained a large grant from a national foundation to create a premier middle school. The new middle school will get its students from an existing, poorly performing elementary school. From the district’s perspective, specialized investments or partnerships with the poorly performing elementary school might help to ensure the success of the new middle school. That in turn might lead to the foundation’s continued or additional investment in the school district.

school district or its budget, it will also be important to understand the mayor's agenda for both schools and neighborhoods.

Public perceptions of the school district's performance will also influence the ability of an outside entity to demand change. Outsiders are likely to have greater leverage to agitate for major change, such as a school closure or reconstitution, if the school or school district is perceived to be failing or dysfunctional. But if the district is seen as strong or improving, it may be harder for an outsider to demand specialized treatment for a particular school unless the superintendent also advocates such an approach. In the case of an improving district, you may need the support of school board members or other politically connected advocates to negotiate effectively with the superintendent for the concessions required to implement your school reform approach.

Finally, if the goal is to establish a new school, it is essential to understand the capital plan for the school district's facilities as well as the school board's and superintendent's politics and history regarding the location of new schools or the approval of charter-school applications.

Neighborhood Conditions

The choice of school improvement strategy should also take into account the characteristics of the neighborhood and its potential for improvement. Factors that influence the neighborhood's potential to become a stable, safe, and desirable community include:

- The quality of the housing stock;
- The homeownership rate;
- Retail and commercial development;
- Cultural institutions;
- Proximity to employment and downtown; and
- Access to public transportation.

In addition, anchor institutions in the neighborhood, which have both a long-term stake in the neighborhood, and resources to commit to a revitalization effort, are important assets for school improvement. These can include universities, hospitals, and major employers.

Finally, any investments planned for the neighborhood that affect the mix of subsidized and market-rate homes, price points, and housing tenure will also affect student enrollment and demographics at the local elementary school and therefore may affect the school improvement strategy.

Where the goal of investment in the neighborhood is to attract middle-class families as well as to improve conditions for existing low-income residents, the school improvement strategy has often featured construction of a new school (whether charter or traditional). Not surprisingly, in these cases the neighborhood investors generally bring in significant funds to support the new school. In neighborhoods that are either more deeply distressed or where investors' goals for the neighborhood do not include attracting higher-income residents to the neighborhood, the school reform strategy tends to focus on improving a pre-existing school. This generally includes renovating the school building but not constructing an entirely new facility.

Mixed-Income Schools and Neighborhoods: Potential Points of Contention

Many community developers in urban settings have a goal of creating income diversity in both neighborhoods and among families using the school. However, we found that the notion of creating mixed-income schools and neighborhoods was a point of contention between educators and community developers in several places we studied.

For example, the educators we interviewed expressed concern about the perception that children cannot learn effectively in schools with an all low-income student body. Although they supported greater economic diversity in schools, they did not believe that economic diversity was necessary for high academic achievement and did not want the lack of economic diversity in a school to be taken as an excuse for poor performance. But the community developers in our study argued that sustaining a high-performing school over time may depend on the resources and political power of a broader base of parents and neighborhood stakeholders.

Community developers advocating for greater income diversity at the school may be more effective if they make it clear that achieving an economically diverse student body is secondary to improving academic outcomes for all children at the school. They should also be explicit that their primary concern in advocating for greater income diversity is to sustain school improvements once achieved.

Another point of contention derives from the perception that mixed-income neighborhood redevelopment will force out the poorest residents and that they will not be able to afford to return. A community developer trying to improve a neighborhood needs to articulate a strategy that is appropriate to the neighborhood and follow it. However, education outsiders should be aware of the controversy over income diversity and gentrification, communicate openly with the school about the plans for the neighborhood and its effects on school enrollment, and work with the school to provide opportunities for existing families to remain in the revitalized neighborhood and school.

Sponsor Type

Finally, the types of outsider sponsors that are available to lead the initiative affect the feasibility of different school reform strategies. Sponsors with political influence, financial resources, prestige, and perceived neutrality will be able to agitate for the most far-reaching changes at the school.

Sponsors who are physically located in the neighborhood (such as a university, major employer, developer, or community-based foundation) are ideal partners, since they, like schools, have a long-term stake in the well-being of the area. Their proximity also makes frequent interaction with the school personnel and children more feasible.

Absent these types of local institutions, distinguishing features about the neighborhood can sometimes draw outside sponsors such as area or national foundations. But these sponsors must be willing to commit the same level of energy and resources to the neighborhood over the long-term as a locally-based sponsor. The characteristics of effective sponsors and the roles they need to play are discussed in greater detail in Section II: Assembling a Strong Sponsor Team.

Examples of How Local Conditions Determine Selection of School Strategies

The following examples illustrate how school, district, neighborhood, and sponsor characteristics can influence the school-improvement strategy.

Example 1: The presence of a local foundation with resources led to the selection of a charter school strategy.

The neighborhood surrounding this school was once economically affluent, but by the 1970s had become economically depressed with only vestiges of its original homeownership base. A large public housing complex was a major blight in the neighborhood, and the school that served children from the complex was badly deteriorated. The demolition of the public housing and the subsequent construction of mixed-income housing with federal funding gave the neighborhood new potential for substantial income diversity. When the redevelopment of the public housing site was planned, the school district did not support or have the funds to demolish and reconstruct a new school for the neighborhood. After the local foundation clashed with the district over the foundation's desire for control over the selection of the school principal, the foundation opted to create a charter school. Charter schools allow for greater independence from the district. Since the district provides no capital funds for charter schools (although charters do receive district operating funds), the foundation led a campaign to raise the millions required to build a new school. The resulting charter school is now moderately mixed-income (slightly less so than the adjacent new housing development). In addition to academics, it focuses on unusually strong extra-curricular activities and technology.

Example 2: A developer-led reconstitution of a public school in a failing school district yielded initial success but concerns about sustainability.

A local developer of multifamily housing owned a moderate-income housing development in a historically poor neighborhood. The developer learned that almost all moderate-income families opted to bus their children to other public schools rather than enroll them in the local elementary school. Planning a second large housing development in the neighborhood that entailed the demolition of public housing and the subsequent construction of mixed-income housing, this well-respected developer led the advocacy effort for the school district to reconstitute the local elementary school. Although this effort succeeded and the developer was also able to raise private funds to renovate the school, continued instability at the district presents a challenge to ongoing school improvement. Academic performance has improved, but is not yet excellent. To help support and sustain the school improvement effort, the developer:

- Formed a nonprofit to serve as an intermediary between the school and the neighborhood;
- Solicited donations of services and supplies to help to supplement the teacher's salaries and pay for teacher training; and
- Led a takeover of the adjacent health clinic to improve health services for children and adults in the neighborhood.

Today, approximately 75 percent of children at the school come from the neighborhood.

Example 3: Collaboration among two non-local foundations and an improving school district reformed a worst-performing elementary school.

This elementary school largely serves a public housing complex located in a once working-class neighborhood that has since become one of the more distressed in the city. The extremity of need in both the neighborhood and the school led two national foundations to invest there. The goal was to improve the school so that it not only helps the children learn better but also stabilizes the neighborhood and ultimately attracts families with children to buy new homes in the neighborhood. But when the large public housing complex adjacent to the school was demolished, enrollment dropped to a level below the threshold for the state share of school funding. The two foundations worked with the school district to keep the school open by:

- Forming a relocation committee comprised of area residents, the housing authority, and the school district to share information about public housing demolition and resident relocation, and to encourage relocating households to remain in the school attendance zone;
- Investing heavily in teacher professional development, turnover of non-performing teachers, and selection of an appropriate curriculum to improve the school's academic performance; and
- Funding the construction of a pre-school annex at the school that will provide incoming kindergartners with early learning opportunities.

The current school still serves a primarily low-income student population, but it has risen from the worst-performing elementary school in the district to one of the best. With an upcoming district-funded renovation of the building, the school is poised to appeal to both the low- and moderate-income families who will occupy the new mixed-income development.

Example 4: A university sponsor and school district interested in innovation led to the creation of a new public school in a mixed-income neighborhood.

Beset by crime and bad publicity, a large urban university adopted comprehensive measures to restore income diversity to its urban neighborhood. A key feature of its plan was to create a new public school that would serve neighborhood children and university families. After a year of negotiations with the school district and the teachers' union, the university was ultimately successful in obtaining support for the creation of a new school by appealing to each party's interests:

- The beleaguered school district was adopting several comprehensive school management reforms, of which the new university-sponsored public school would be one model.
- The teachers' union agreed to school-based selection of staff to prove its willingness to innovate.
- The university would provide curricular support and training to teacher staff as well as additional operating subsidy to fund smaller class sizes than the district could afford.

The elementary school has since become one of the district's highest performing and most diverse schools.

II. Assembling a Strong Sponsor Team

One clear lesson from our research is that successfully integrating school improvement into a community revitalization initiative requires a strong sponsor from outside the school system.

Although the school may already have a talented principal, a principal rarely has sufficient power within the system to create a degree of change able to sustain an improvement after his or her tenure ends. The pressures and incentives for a school superintendent to improve system-wide performance competes with his or her ability to grant specialized attention, programming, funding, or concessions to the particular elementary school that is most important to the neighborhood. Likewise, school boards usually are comprised of people who represent specific constituencies. They may have higher political ambitions, and the members change as they serve out their terms and new members are elected.

By contrast, sponsors with a long-term stake in the well-being of a community have a natural incentive to focus attention on a single school or cluster of schools that can be sustained beyond the tenure of one or more talented school leaders.

One clear lesson from our research is that successfully integrating school improvement into a community revitalization initiative requires a strong sponsor from outside the school system.

Different types of organizations from outside the school system can serve as the sponsor for a new school or the improvement of an existing school. Smaller neighborhood-based organizations may be important partners for the school and collaborators with the school reform effort, but are unlikely to possess the level of political clout or money needed to create a new school or provide far-reaching improvements to an existing school. We observed the following sponsor types:

- Real estate developers of a large number of rental or homeownership units in the school's neighborhood;
- A foundation with a strong community presence;
- A community intermediary, such as the YMCA or United Way;
- A university;
- A large employer with a long-term stake in the neighborhood; and
- A large and well-established community development corporation.

The experiences of the 12 neighborhoods and schools studied for this paper suggest that the most effective outside sponsors of school improvement have the following four qualities:

1. **Political Influence.** The sponsor organization and the leadership team it provides needs to have sufficient political influence to bring to the table key players such as the mayor, the superintendent, school board members, and the leaders of key local institutions and businesses. In addition, political influence helps the sponsor develop financial support for the construction or renovation of the facility, enhancements to the curriculum and other programming. Political influence is also important for ensuring that the sponsor has a degree of control over what happens to the school, so that improvement does not get derailed. For example, a sponsor with political influence may be able

to protect the principal's autonomy to select qualified teachers, to develop them professionally, and to replace teachers who are not performing. Alternatively, the sponsor may be able to insist on the replacement of a principal who is not a good fit with the school's needs.

2. **Long-Term Commitment to the Neighborhood.** The sponsor is the keeper of the vision for the school improvement and the key force keeping the momentum going. As such, the sponsor needs to be able to maintain the vision for the school through successive principals, mayors, governors, superintendents, and school boards. Although the sponsor's role and importance may diminish over time as a parent group becomes more active, it may never go away. Sponsors of some of the most successful neighborhood-based school reform efforts in our study plan to support the school, both politically and financially, for an indefinite time. Their vision for change acknowledges that turning a distressed or deteriorating neighborhood into a neighborhood of choice may take 10 to 15 years, even with a very substantial initial investment in housing and physical infrastructure.
3. **Financial Resources.** If it has a strong local presence and political clout, the sponsor does not have to have deep pockets. But the type of organization capable of serving as an effective sponsor usually does. Sponsors typically contribute to or raise funds for construction or renovation of school facilities, technology improvements at the school, and professional development for teachers.
4. **Local Presence and Staff.** The most effective sponsors are entities that have standing in the community and are understood to be committed to community improvement over the long term. National foundations or other organizations that are not headquartered in the neighborhood or city may be effective sponsors, provided they fund one or more locally-based staff to act as liaisons between the neighborhood revitalization effort and the school. As one sponsor put it, the job of this staff person is to "get up every day to worry about what is happening at the school." He or she needs to be able to speak the language of school reform as well as the language of community development. Several successful efforts studied for this paper found they needed to bring someone in from the world of education in order to gain the respect of educators at the school and in the school system. Where the staff person works and who pays the salary may differ depending on pre-existing institutional connections, but, to provide a separate set of eyes and ears on behalf of the sponsor, this staff person should not be an employee of the school system.

Even with these qualities, a sponsor organization may need to work through an intermediary organization—at least initially—to work constructively with the school and district. Some types of sponsors, particularly for-profit developers, may have a harder time gaining the trust of the school and district than others. In these cases, a different organization that is perceived as being more neutral may be needed to broker the relationship.

For example, one housing developer formed a nonprofit organization to serve as a liaison between the school and neighborhood institutions. Its board is made up of neighborhood residents, church leaders, investors in the new housing development, managers of other nearby housing developments, and the principal of the elementary school. Funded through the operating budget for the large housing development, one of the people on staff at the nonprofit spends a substantial amount of time at the school. This person serves as the "eyes and ears" of the community and supports activities that link the community to the school, including after-school programs and computer- and job-training for adults.

Building Trust as an Outside Sponsor

The most effective sponsors of neighborhood and school change are highly involved in the school and have come to enjoy relationships of mutual trust with the school principal. However, these relationships sometimes started out adversarial, and it took time to build trust.

Whether the school strategy is to create a new traditional or charter school or to work with an existing one, an effective sponsor is sensitive to the school's interests and motivations, which may be somewhat different from the sponsor's. For example, while schools and their outside sponsors will share the goal of improving educational opportunities for children already in the neighborhood, some sponsors may also see an improved school as a way of attracting families with higher incomes to the neighborhood. Although the school's leadership may welcome greater economic diversity among the student body, their primary focus will be on helping the existing schoolchildren succeed, regardless of their economic background. The school may also be concerned about neighborhood redevelopment causing gentrification and resulting in fewer low-income children having access to the school if their families can no longer afford to live in the area. Being sensitive to these issues and the different resonance that "mixed-income" may have for educators versus community development practitioners will help you as a sponsor to work more productively with the school.

Several principals told us that having a relationship with the managers of rental properties where their schoolchildren live helps them to address student absenteeism, discipline problems, and other issues that can prevent students from learning.

Regardless of the type of organization, most sponsors of neighborhood and school improvement have resources they can bring to a school that will be readily valued and are not threatening. These resources can be an important way of building trust with school leadership and staff, whether the school is improving, newly created, or reconstituted. Such resources include employees (or in the case of a university sponsor, students) who can mentor and tutor children at the school, technical assistance to the school leadership in areas such as technology and capital plan fundraising, and information about what is going on in the neighborhood, including how the revitalization activities might affect enrollment at the school. Because student enrollments are the primary way schools receive their funding, schools need (and want) accurate demographic projections for the neighborhood. This is valuable information an outsider can use in discussions of the school change.

Sponsors who are involved in housing redevelopment can also open a channel for communication between the managers of rental housing properties in the neighborhood and school staff. Several principals told us that having a relationship with the managers of rental properties where their schoolchildren live helps them to address student absenteeism, discipline problems, and other issues that can prevent students from learning. For example, property managers can call the school if they see children around during school hours and can co-sponsor family events that build relationships between parents and school staff and increase parental engagement with the school.

Building trust is necessary to influence the core school activities that affect student learning, such as teaching practices, curriculum, and teacher planning and professional development time. These activities are much more difficult for an outside sponsor to influence, because they are rightly seen as the purview of educators. However, as described in the next section, a sponsor must be able to advocate for the core fundamentals—high-quality principal, teaching staff, and curriculum—in order to support the improvement of a failing school. If the characteristics of the sponsor, school, or school district are such that the sponsor is not able to influence the core activities at the school, and if there are not other entities advocating for the school’s improvement either inside or outside the system, it will be very difficult to create a school that supports the broader revitalization effort.

III. Elements of Successful Schools

Our interviews with educators and analysis of school improvement efforts at 12 schools suggest that the following three elements are critical for improving elementary schools in revitalizing urban neighborhoods:

1. An excellent principal and well-qualified teachers;
2. A rigorous curriculum; and
3. Quality early childhood education programming.

Other important features of improved schools include:

4. A school facility that is clean, safe, and inviting;
5. Specialized school programming; and
6. An active parent body.

As an outside sponsor of school improvement, where you start and how far you go in each of these areas will depend on the school reform approach, the district's support for that approach, and the assets that you bring to the effort, including your knowledge of education reform and credibility with the school district. However, in order to have a substantial impact on academic outcomes, the school improvement strategy must address the first three core areas.

The educators we interviewed said that the quality of the principal and teachers is the most important determinant of whether a school will succeed.

An Excellent Principal and Well-Qualified Teachers

The educators we interviewed said that the quality of the principal and teachers is the most important determinant of whether a school will succeed. The mechanism by which outside sponsors are able to influence the choice of principal and teachers at the school depends on the nature of the school reform (e.g., formal reconstitution, charter school) and the degree of control exercised by the school district. Following are three examples of how outside sponsors advocated for strong leadership and teaching staff at their schools.

1. **Negotiating for principal control over staff selection.** A university sponsor advocated for creating a new public elementary school in the neighborhood surrounding the university. The university was investing in homeownership, anti-crime initiatives, and economic development in the neighborhood. An excellent new school was seen as a way to provide better educational opportunities for neighborhood children, to stabilize families in the neighborhood, and to attract new homeowners. Over the course of a year, the sponsor was able to negotiate an agreement with the school district and teachers' union to make the school a demonstration site for selection of staff by the principal, an unusual practice in the district. Because the school was completely new, the principal was able to handpick her first teaching staff and have control over subsequent hiring and dismissal of teachers. The union agreed to give the principal this level of autonomy to support innovation through a demonstration school.
2. **Reconstituting a school.** The developer of a large mixed-income rental housing development sought to improve the performance of the neighborhood elementary school and use the school as a means of attracting new families to the community. A gradually increasing reform climate within the school district and the threat of competition from charter schools made it possible for

the sponsor to ask the school district and school board to reconstitute the school. The school board agreed and gave the sponsor and neighborhood residents a voice in choosing the new principal. However, delays in hiring the principal meant that it was not possible to replace all of the teaching staff in the first year. Instead, under-performing teachers were dismissed and replaced over a four-year period, resulting in slower improvement at this school compared to other schools in our study.

- 3. Working with the school district to replace teaching staff.** Replacing inadequate administrators and teachers may be most feasible in the worst performing schools, where all parties (e.g., sponsor, school district, and teachers' union) recognize the need for radical change. One of the school and neighborhood improvement efforts in our study focused on implementing a comprehensive reform initiative across several schools in a district. The reform featured a rigorous academic curriculum, student and family support services at the school, and community involvement in the school. The sponsor of the initiative was a local foundation that chose to start by implementing the initiative at a school that was among the worst in the state: only two percent of the students at this school were at grade level for reading and math. Given such poor performance, the teachers' union was willing to work with the foundation to find ways to bring in better teachers. Teachers at the school were not dismissed, but they had to reapply and re-interview for their positions because the new curriculum imposed new requirements, including several weeks of additional training. Following this process, only 20 percent of the existing teachers stayed at the school.

A Rigorous Curriculum

The schools in our study used many different curricula. The educators emphasized the importance of choosing a “research-based” curriculum that fits the needs and characteristics of the student body and then training teachers to implement the curriculum effectively. Following are three examples of how outside sponsors of neighborhood and school improvement have supported their schools in selecting and implementing rigorous academic curricula.

- 1. Helping the school select a curriculum.** In one of the cities in our study, the school superintendent required all the elementary schools in the district to select a comprehensive reform model, including a curriculum. The goal was to improve their performance and close the achievement gap for low-income and minority students. In this case, the outside sponsor of the school-improvement effort was a national nonprofit organization with a local presence in the city. The nonprofit supported the school in selecting a strong curriculum by researching the different curricula available and paying for the school's curriculum selection committee (which included the principal and teachers) to travel to another city to observe the curricula in action at a few schools.
- 2. Supporting the design and implementation of a new curriculum.** A university located in a downtown revitalizing neighborhood was one of the key sponsors of the creation of a new public elementary school. Because the university has a science and technology focus, creating a science and technology themed school was a natural choice. Although the curriculum and instructional materials were selected by the principal and teachers, the university paid for a consultant to hold a design charette that produced some of the physical concepts for the school. These included “teacher spaces” instead of the traditional front-of-classroom desk, and flexible learning areas with sliding panels.

The university also provided input into the technology needed for the school, which was paid for in part by a \$50,000 grant from a local corporation. Ten years after the school's creation, the university sponsor serves on the school council and is in weekly contact with the principal about how to keep the technology-oriented portion of the curriculum most up to date.

- 3. Making corrections to the academic program mid-course.** An area foundation partnered with its school district to implement an improvement model for schools that serve a large number of students living in poverty. It was implemented in three schools. In the initial years, the model primarily focused on providing a comprehensive set of family and community support services on the school site. But this failed to yield substantial improvements in the children's academic performance. So the foundation restructured its model to align its investments around a new standards-based curriculum. The teachers' professional development was focused on assuring that the teaching of math, reading, and writing was consistent across grades. The learning supports, such as crisis prevention and counseling, were chosen more selectively to support student learning. Student achievement has improved substantially since the model was reoriented around curriculum and learning.

Quality Early Childhood Education Programming

A lesson learned from all the sites in the study is that a strong early childhood education program should be in place from the start to make significant and lasting improvements to the elementary school. High-quality early childhood education has a proven impact on the aptitude and academic achievement of low-income children.² Not only do high-quality early childhood programs lead to better academic outcomes for children, they may also help parents obtain and retain jobs by providing affordable daycare. Engaging parents in preschool activities—a stage when parents are most likely to be involved in their children's education—also makes it more likely that they will be involved in their children's later schooling. The early childhood component can be offered directly by the school or through a partner organization such as a YMCA.

Some outside sponsors of elementary school improvement use early childhood education as a point of entry to working with the school. Elementary school principals understand the value of quality early childhood education and how it benefits their schools, so are likely to be receptive to help in this area. Creating a strong early childhood education program can also be a way for an outside sponsor to influence student achievement even before the main elementary school improvement effort gets underway.

One sponsor of school improvement in our study is a developer that is trying to transform a historically very poor urban neighborhood into a mixed-income community through large-scale public housing redevelopment. The developer and other investors in the neighborhood have built more than 1,000 new units of rental and homeownership housing, which they hope will attract middle-income families to the

A strong early childhood education program should be in place from the start to make significant and lasting improvements to the elementary school.

² Ellen Galinsky (2006). *The Economic Benefits of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs: What Makes the Difference*. Washington D.C.: The Committee of Economic Development.

neighborhood as well as improve conditions for existing residents. The elementary school serving the neighborhood is under-performing but not failing, so there is little opportunity for the developer to push for a new school or a school reconstitution. Nevertheless, the developer and investors wish to improve educational opportunities for children living in the neighborhood. Their starting point is to help create an early childhood education program at the new neighborhood YMCA that will serve neighborhood children, starting at the age of two, and track their progress up until they turn seven. The goal of the program is to ensure that children are performing at grade level by third grade.

A Safe, Clean, and Inviting School Building

Most of the improved schools in our study had new buildings, and those in pre-existing facilities had undergone some form of renovation. The extent to which outside sponsors funded the renovation or construction varied greatly across the 12 schools studied for this paper. Two of the schools were newly created public schools with state-of-the-art facilities paid for almost entirely by their respective school districts. By contrast, the foundation sponsor of a charter school raised approximately \$18 million for its new school building; states rarely provide funding for capital costs for charter schools. Most of the school initiatives in our study were somewhere in the mid-range, with sponsors providing between \$50,000 and \$2 million for physical renovations and upgrades to the facility. The most common renovations were to increase the amount of natural light in the school and to rewire the school for technology.

Specialized School Programming

In addition to a rigorous curriculum, many of the schools studied for this paper offered some sort of specialized school programming, such as a focus on technology, a rich arts curriculum, or an unusually strong sports program. Not all schools have a theme (such as science or performing arts), but many go “beyond the basics” to include a strong academic curriculum supported by an array of extra-curricular activities. Specialized sports and arts programs can potentially make the school more attractive to a broad range of families while enriching the education of all children at the school.

An Active Parent Council or Outside Sponsor to Substitute

Many top-performing schools have a committed group of parents who monitor the school’s performance. Schools in low-income communities, however, often do not enjoy a high level of parental involvement. In such cases, the outside sponsor can initially act as a proxy for an active parent council that advocates for continuous improvement to the curriculum and teaching at the school. However, the sponsor should not overlook the importance of strong involvement by the children’s parents at the school, given the direct benefit that parental involvement brings for a child’s ability to succeed. The school initiative should take steps—such as leadership training for parents—to cultivate a core of committed parents or community members who can take ownership of the project.

IV. Supporting School Improvement

Just as certain activities at the school directly translate into higher academic achievement for children, certain neighborhood investments contribute directly to school improvement and academic achievement. Following are the neighborhood revitalization activities that most directly support student achievement. Although sponsors' efforts in the neighborhood typically go far beyond this list, incorporating these activities into the revitalization plan will strengthen the school improvement effort.

1. **Housing development or housing services that reduce student mobility.** Schools serving poor students frequently experience high rates of student mobility as families face eviction or lack of affordable housing. Increasing the supply of affordable housing in the neighborhood can help retain families. Similarly, housing services, such as credit counseling, counseling on tenants' rights, homeownership counseling, home maintenance courses, and small grants for security deposits or emergencies, can help families retain or improve their housing.

Where plans include large-scale redevelopment, coordination of resident relocation with school schedules to minimize mid-year moves and to encourage inter-zone relocation can be an important means to reduce student mobility. Relocation can dramatically reduce enrollment and even cause schools to close. A relocation committee that includes the schools can be an excellent way to share information on an ongoing basis. It can also be a way to educate relocation counselors about schools so they incorporate school options into their counseling of families about their housing options.

2. **Communication between housing managers and school staff.** Regular communication with the managers of large rental housing developments in the neighborhood can be an important asset to the school for addressing student absenteeism, discipline problems, and other issues that can prevent students from learning. Educators understand that children who have problems at school often also have problems at home. Housing management staff can keep an eye out for school-age children in the development during school hours, and may be able to intervene with a family if the school staff reports that a student seems to be in crisis. Typically, it is a school nurse, social worker, or designated community liaison who communicates with the housing manager, but the principal may also work with housing managers on issues such as recruiting parents for school events and planning family activities jointly.

Creating open lines of communication between the school and housing managers makes the most sense when a substantial share of students attending the school live in one or two housing developments. If there are no large rental housing developments in the neighborhood, it may be beneficial for the school to establish relationships with local community-based organizations or places of worship that work with the families of school students. The goal is to give school staff a better understanding of the challenges their students may be facing at home and an opportunity to coordinate with family providers to support the students if they can.

3. **Anti-crime initiatives.** Research on housing mobility has shown that crime is a major factor influencing low- and moderate-income families' choice of neighborhood. (Middle- and upper-

class families usually already have the privilege of living in safe communities.) A safe community in which to get to school is essential to school participation and children's well-being. The community development effort should pay special attention both to actual safety within the immediate vicinity of the school and to removing blight, such as boarded-up buildings and trash, that prospective parents will associate with criminal activity when considering sending their children to the school. Working outward from the school, greening vacant or underdeveloped areas with trees and plants can reduce subsequent littering and loitering.

4. **Community organizing and resident leadership.** Leadership training specifically targeted at the schoolchildren's parents can increase their involvement in the school and their community, as well as improve their economic well-being. Whereas parents of 45 percent of non-poor children reported acting as a volunteer or serving on a school committee, parents of only 27 percent of poor children reported the same.³ An informed and engaged parent body can advocate for resources at the school and push the school to ever-higher standards of teaching and academic achievement.
5. **Family services.** Because family stability is an important factor in student achievement, the parents of children attending the school should have ready access to services and programming that can help them stabilize their income and other aspects of their lives. Most public housing redevelopment projects and other neighborhood revitalization initiatives include the provision of workforce development and other family services through community-based organizations. It is important for school staff to know about these resources so that they can refer children and their families when possible. Some of the school reform initiatives studied for this paper have opted to co-locate community-based organizations, health clinics, and social service agencies in the school building. The idea is that children are more likely to have access to the services if they are in the school building and adults who come into the school for services may be more likely to become involved in their children's education or take advantage of adult learning opportunities offered at the school. However, for most of the school-neighborhood initiatives studied for this paper, providing social services on the school site is peripheral to the reform approach. Although several schools offer adult educational programming on site (e.g., computer training after hours) and resources for parents through the library or a parenting center, they have generally not embraced the model of housing a range of service providers in the school building. This is because of concerns that a focus on services may divert attention and resources away from academic instruction.

³ Vaden-Kiernan, N., and McManus, J. (2005). *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2002–03* (NCES 2005–043). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Table 3.

V. Conclusion

This paper offers guidance for how outsiders to school systems, such as developers, community-based organizations, universities, and foundations, can best support high-quality elementary education in the neighborhoods in which they are investing. In-depth research into 12 school-neighborhood improvement efforts in seven cities suggests that although there is no single approach to working with under-performing or failing elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods, improving academic outcomes requires a sustained focus on principal and teacher quality, curriculum, and early childhood education.

Principal and teacher quality and curriculum may be the most difficult for an outsider to influence, but they are critically important. If there is no way to improve these core elements within the regular school system—by creating a new public school, reconstituting an existing school, or otherwise substantially reforming a school’s staffing and curriculum—an investor in neighborhood change may need to work outside the regular school system by creating a charter school. Or the investor might moderate investments in the neighborhood until the groundwork has been laid for comprehensive change that includes a good school.

Regardless of the school reform approach, being an effective sponsor of school improvement requires political and financial resources, a strong local presence, and a long-term commitment to the neighborhood.

Successful integration of school improvement into a neighborhood revitalization effort also requires sensitivity to potentially competing viewpoints about the extent to which greater income diversity should be a goal for the school and the need to invest in systemic change versus individual school improvement. Neighborhood revitalization efforts are, by definition, place-based, whereas school district administrators and elected officials have a mandate to improve the whole system. This tension is essential to understand and will likely endure, but it does not preclude the need for community developers and other investors in neighborhood revitalization to advocate for high-performing schools in their communities. With a long-term commitment to the school and a sustained focus on principals and teachers, curriculum, and early childhood education, outsiders can have a profound effect on individual schools and the academic outcomes of the children who attend them.

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