

New London Public Schools:
Governance and
Management Audit

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NEW LONDON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Governance and Management Audit

The purpose of this report is to analyze school district leadership; district and school organizational arrangements; and school district governance structure and functions, including the relationships among district administrators, the Board of Education, Mayor, City Council and community as each relates to the New London Public Schools. This report is developed as authorized by the State Department of Education's Bureau of Accountability and Improvement. Although the Bureau gave the researchers the charge for the study, the audit was carried out independently based on the methodology presented below. The project involves analysis, findings and recommendations, not evaluation of personnel at any level. The study was conducted between March 19 and April 19, 2012.

METHODOLOGY

Data collections consisted of extensive, face-to-face interviews with school officials, members of the Board of Education, the Mayor, members of the City Council, school principals, leaders of employee unions, community social service organizations, business leaders, higher education representatives, members of the community, teachers, and parents. In all, 55 individuals were interviewed. Other information was derived from a review of school district documents including the Cambridge Report, the District School Improvement Plan, School District Goals, District Budget, Organizational Charts, Board of Education meeting minutes and employee contracts. Schools were visited. Meetings of the School Board and Finance Committee of the City Council were observed.

Interviews were arranged by the school district within identified role categories. All interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality. In most cases, the interviews were conducted by both researchers to add credibility and consistency to the analysis. Interview data were analyzed for recurrent factors and themes that emerged. Likewise, all documents were reviewed by both researchers. A final draft of the report was reviewed by school officials for factual and interpretative correctness. The resulting report is based on the data sources described above, the opinions, perceptions and insights of interviewees, and the observations of the researchers based on their knowledge and experience.

CONTEXT

The New London community is divided along socio-economic and racial/ethnic lines. It was reported that in the past, membership on elected boards and committees came almost exclusively from citizens with somewhat similar backgrounds and interests. Community perceptions reflect an outlook regarding the New London many remember, and change is perceived as a threat to the status quo. Although members of minority groups are now serving on various boards and governmental bodies, there appears to be limited active engagement or empowerment by minority groups in most local governmental affairs. The city political culture seems to be to some degree dominated by long-standing New London elected officials who appear to cycle on and off boards and other elected offices. Support for the New London Public Schools among these groups and individuals is weak and reflects very little confidence in the school system. There is very little coordinated political support for the schools, and relationships between the School District and City government are either poor or non-existent. Part of the existing political culture is the belief that the school system cannot be improved.

Based on our research, incremental changes in New London will not make a significant difference in the quality of education provided. Approaches to closing the achievement gap over recent years in New London have tended to focus on creating magnet schools, implementing various curricular programs, building teacher and leader capacity at the school level, using data more effectively to plan improvements and consolidating services in the district office. Community support for and engagement in the public school *system* and overall academic performance has declined in spite of these improvements. It is important to note that despite some fluctuations over the decades, and despite some relatively isolated case examples to the contrary, economic, racial, ethnic, and social class achievement gaps have proven stubborn and lasting in New London and across the country.

Given the New London School District and community context described here, only powerful, transformational and systemic interventions have a chance of changing the achievement gap in New London. The community needs to be

organized, energized and engaged to support a comprehensive pre-kindergarten to grade 12 district improvement plan that will result in all New London students graduating from high school college and career ready. Bold, future-oriented and coordinated political and educational leadership are essential. The current political environment coupled with continuing resource challenges will very likely result in even wider achievement gap issues for New London students. The overarching problems of school performance, community capacity and the will to create the conditions for improvement are of extreme urgency. Therefore, the recommendations that are contained in this report must be seen in that light.

GOVERNANCE

Governance directly relates to the policies and decisions that define organizational expectations, grant power and authority, and establish and monitor accountability structures and procedures. Governance also relates to the decision-making processes that determine who has authority to make what decisions, how decisions are made and which decisions will ultimately be implemented. Mounting evidence in the educational research and “best practice” literature point to the importance of governance policies and practices as essential for addressing persistent achievement issues in schools and school districts.

Governance for education in each Connecticut community includes regulations and statutorily defined responsibilities associated with each town’s governing body, the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools. It is the inter-relatedness and complexities associated with those relationships that can lead to either a coherent, goal-focused educational system or an incoherent system with conflicts regarding educational priorities and use of resources. Our findings suggest the latter characterizes the current state of governance in the New London Public Schools. Governance problems are at the core of the most challenging educational improvement challenges outlined in this report.

Findings:

1. The governance structures within the New London Public Schools are similar to the structures in many, if not most, school districts of similar size. There is a seven member elected Board of Education that is responsible for promoting the educational interests of the state, community and the school district. Four members of the New London Board of Education are new to the Board this year. Four members of the Board that hired the current Superintendent left the Board in the fall of 2011. Many interviewees report a pattern of conflict, disagreement and distrust of the administration among members of the current Board. Many described the Board’s decisions as primarily reactive and driven by individual personal agendas. The State Department of Education initiated a series of Board governance

workshops (Lighthouse Training) for the Board since the new Board took office, but the State Department of Education discontinued the sessions because they were not perceived by Board members to be helpful or necessary. There is a significant discrepancy between how Board members describe their effectiveness in carrying out the Board's responsibilities and how almost every other person interviewed described the Board's effectiveness. Organizational and procedural problems permeate all aspects of the Board's ability to provide coherent governance.

2. Traditional responsibilities of school boards include establishing school district policy, working collaboratively with the Superintendent and community to develop a vision for their schools, holding the Superintendent accountable for the administration of the schools, exercising broad, "balcony-level" oversight of educational programs, and formulating strategies and standards based on high expectations for all students and monitoring performance to achieve those standards. Some school boards tend to avoid the key functions of policy making and direction setting and focus on micro-management of the administrative functions and responsibilities of the school administration. This appears to be the case in the New London School District. The present committee structure and Board meeting operations contribute to this role and responsibility confusion and ambiguity. Regular Board meetings do not seem to focus on the critical issues facing the district like improving student achievement or initiatives for school improvement. Board meetings do not appear to focus on substantive issues. Instead they often deal with procedure, political posturing, theatre and questioning actions taken by the administration. Board member behavior is occasionally uncivil to each other and the Superintendent and embarrassing to public observers. There is little evidence that the Board knows much about the actual workings of the New London schools or the responsibilities associated with governing the school district. The Board often focuses on the management of administrative functions and the responsibilities of the school administration. Many interviewees described the Board as dysfunctional.
3. The Board functions with Board committees that have a traditional focus (eg. finance, policy, personnel/legal). The Board committees appear to add to the incoherence of the district improvement focus and are used by

4. Communications between the Board of Education and School District Officials and City Officials (Mayor, City Council members) appears to range from non-existent to unproductive. This lack of even basic communication in New London among these key public officials often leads to tensions and hostility, and makes complex problems even more severe. These inter-governmental relations do not need to be so. Both City Officials and School District Officials need to make special two-way, invitational efforts to move to more productive relationships. The Mayor now is an ex-officio member of the Board and this change has the potential to either exacerbate conflict or become an avenue of mutual understanding and eventual support. Without a dramatic improvement in this area of inter-governmental communication, the combination of diminishing public support, declining resources allocated for the school district and lack of cohesive leadership will inevitably result in even less success in addressing student achievement challenges.
5. Structures and opportunities for constructive engagement between town and community stakeholders appear to be very limited. Although many meetings and formal relationships are described, there is little evidence of authentic and purposeful engagement that lead to positive results in support of school district improvement efforts. Support for the schools from community groups and the higher education community appears to be program specific, fragmented and not coordinated.
6. Neither the school district budget request nor information about the school district's strategic plans, goals or objectives and accomplishments are well communicated to the Board, City Officials, and the community. There is little information provided that shows the connections between the budget request and program needs and directions. The School District budget request has little or no support at the City level. The School District budget has been flat funded for at least three years and may well be again this year. The Board of Education's budget recommendation is perceived by the Town government as the "Superintendent's" recommended budget. Board members expressed concern regarding their role in deciding what

needs to be included or eliminated from the recommended budget. This perception clouds the necessary Board and City Council problem solving work around school finances. Lack of revenue resources is not the only reason for the lack of school district funding. There is more interest within the City government in gaining control of school district finances, including the transfer of the entire School District Business Office to the City than supporting a responsible Board of Education recommended budget. The disagreement regarding control of the School District Business Office by the City government is a source of considerable tension among the School Board, the Superintendent, the Mayor and the City Council.

7. In order to function effectively and efficiently, school boards need to pay close attention to the Board-Superintendent partnership. There is evidence in New London that there is no clear and adhered to policy of what functions should be reserved to the Board and what functions belong to the Superintendent. It does not seem to be accurate to describe the relationship between the Board and Superintendent as a partnership in any way. The Board President and Superintendent appear to have a functional relationship, with ambiguous role and responsibility parameters. Further, the treatment of the Superintendent by the Board is often hostile and unprofessional. The Superintendent's response to this type of Board interaction occasionally leads to a terse response and then strained communication. Other members of the administrative staff also experience a range of unprofessional reactions from members of the Board when called upon to present at Board meetings.
8. It appears that Board members are often open to influence by individual teachers, administrators or parents without referring matters to the Superintendent. When these personal communications are played out at Board meetings and in relation to recommendations presented by the Administration, the result is often conflict and misunderstanding. This practice promotes dysfunctional communication patterns, distrust and micro-management behavior on the part of the Board.

Recommendations:

1. The Board needs to have a much better understanding of its role and responsibilities. The Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) developed a *School Governance Position Paper* (2004 & 2007). This document is readily available on both organizations' websites. Board members and the Superintendent should consider using this document as a basis for rebuilding the New London Governance Team. The introduction to this document opens with:

"As a leadership team, the board and the superintendent must create a system-wide approach to improving student achievement, recognizing the board's appropriate role as the community's representative and the superintendent's appropriate role as the professionally trained educator."

The Board also should have a Board Member Handbook that would include sections, for example, about the responsibilities of Board Members, the Superintendent's responsibilities, use of Board Policies, conducting Board Hearings, Superintendent evaluation, executive sessions, open meeting requirements, ethical standards, and discipline of Board members. CABE is a good resource for Handbook samples and Board training options. All Board members should be required to understand and agree to the regulations developed by the Board and presented in the document. Further, it is recommended that in addition to or instead of traditional Board member training the Board should observe well-established and effective functioning Boards in similar communities. The Board will likely need the services of a highly experienced and skillful Board governance consultant to move forward in a positive, mission-driven manner in this effort. Many Boards across the country have moved to "*policy-based governance*". A description of this approach to governance can be found in **What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance in Urban Schools**, Donald McAdams, Teachers College Press, 2006. As we will reaffirm later in this report, traditional, voluntary Board workshops will not be sufficient to address the governance issues described above. There appears to be very little, if any, interest or willingness among some members of the Board to

participate in any type of Board training or development activities. This circumstance or condition will require a special form of intervention that must be designed and delivered at a level commensurate with the scope and importance of the problem.

2. *“Board meetings are the time and place at which the Board acts, and what the public sees at Board meetings largely determines what the public thinks of the board. Effective board meetings are the first prerequisite for reform governance.”* (McAdams, pp. 84) The major portion of Board of Education meetings should focus on the large and significant issues in the schools such as improving student achievement. The Board should focus on ends – the outcomes that they want the Superintendent and his team to achieve – and use targets or benchmarks to monitor progress. Each Board meeting should contain an action item or report dealing with district and school initiatives designed to improve student achievement and close the achievement gaps. It is the responsibility of the Superintendent and the Board President to have such items on the agenda. If parliamentary procedure is a problem and disrupts Board business, then the Board should appoint a parliamentarian to rule on such questions and stop wasting Board time debating procedural issues. The Board needs to act as a group in reaching important decisions. The Board needs to adhere to its own established policies and to work with the Superintendent to see and understand how established policies and procedures relate to each other and Board goals.
3. Board committees, if they are to exist at all, must focus on high profile, Board goal-related issues such as innovation to accelerate progress toward achievement goals and on performance monitoring. Such committees should provide a base for important initiatives that cut across administrative functions. Board Committee charges should be reviewed by the Board annually and be approved by the full Board each year. Any changes or additions to a Board Committee’s charge must be reviewed and voted on by the Board. If every committee decision and recommendation comes to the full Board for full review and a repeat of the committee’s work, the Board should consider operating as a committee of the whole and reduce or eliminate most committees.

4. Regular verbal and written communication should be provided to City officials and media regarding important initiatives, actions, and results. The form of these reports would be brief and designed to communicate better to a variety of people than the School District Improvement Plan does. In addition to and integrated with the State-mandated District Improvement Plan there needs to be a more public-friendly New London Schools' Building a Better Future-type plan that is used to communicate the district vision and strategic plan. There needs to be a revitalized and purposeful communication strategy developed and implemented. Thought should be given to creating a City Governance Council that could involve the Superintendent, the Board Chair, the Mayor and Chair of the City Council in meeting once a month. Development of the agenda for those meetings should rotate between the Superintendent and the Mayor.

5. The school district budget request must be completely transparent, reflect an accountability-orientation and be presented in a manner that interested citizens and key stakeholders can easily access and understand. The overarching budget message should contain a format that answers the question, "What does the Board and School District need the money for? And How does the budget request drive important improvement priorities?" The budget should include and highlight an explanation of the relationship among goals, objectives, programs and resources. A frequently asked questions (FAQ) section should also be considered and expanded each year as predictable and important questions are presented. There must be Board ownership and advocacy for the budget that it finally recommends to the City Council. The Board President should consider taking a more active role in presenting and discussing the school budget to City officials once the Board approves the budget.

6. To be effective, school boards must reach out to external stakeholders and constituencies. The Board should play a key role in soliciting and nurturing community support to both inform the public of important school matters and to gain the resources necessary for school improvement. This outreach work must come from the Board as whole and not just individual Board members. This work involves the ability to communicate with various publics, other organizations, other branches of government, and the capacity to work out collaborative relationships to solve common problems.

7. The frequently cited issues of unnecessary administrative positions and inflated salaries for administrators need to be addressed through a proactive approach by the Board. The administrative structure in New London appears to be lean and given the scope of the challenge it is difficult to imagine significantly reduced resources in this area. Information must be collected and portrayed regarding the administrative load in New London including comparisons of the number of administrative positions, compensation levels for such positions and the responsibilities of administrators in other comparable districts. It needs to be made clear which positions are supported by grant funds. The organizational chart should only include administrative positions. All considerations of administrative reductions or transfers must be carefully considered using facts, not myths, using criteria that involve quality of service, connection to Board goals, cost-effectiveness, and long-range implications.

8. The Board President and Superintendent should work to establish and reinforce a process and procedure for Board members to use when approached by any member of the public or member of the school or city staff regarding a complaint or concern. Board members must recognize that they only have authority to act as part of the Board. Channeling communication in a consistent manner helps the Board and administration work together in support of district goals.

ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

All organizations have a management structure that determines relationships between functions and positions and delegate's roles, responsibilities and authority to carry out defined tasks. Within that framework it is understood that effective district leadership has a significant and measurable effect on student achievement when it involves collaborative decision-making, the establishment of non-negotiable goals, monitoring of achievement goals, and effectively using resources to support those goals. The Board of Education must be overtly and consistently in support of school district performance goals. As Peter Drucker has written, "Every organization is perfectly designed to get the results that it gets." With respect to New London Schools, the organizational structure should be aligned with goals and priorities that are cooperatively developed and there needs to be a clear and specific accountability system in place that hold individuals in the organizations to standards of performance as well as provides the resources and capacity necessary to achieve meaningful results.

There is now well-established evidence in the research and best practice literature that effective district leadership has a significant and measurable effect on student achievement. The district leadership responsibilities or actions that characterize the actual work of the Superintendent and Central Office in high performing school districts of all types are known and referred to specifically in the recommendations section below. It is important to note here that leadership, governance and organizational factors are interdependent. Purposeful and strategic improvement plans must be designed and implemented in a manner that addresses each of these areas simultaneously in order to produce significant, positive improvements in the things that count.

Findings:

1. The Superintendent and District Administration spend an inordinate amount of time responding to and preparing for Board of Education meetings and requests. (Board and City politics consume a great deal of attention within the school system and seem to distract from the primary goals of improving student learning.) The Superintendent appears to have

significantly restricted authority to lead and manage the school system. The Board of Education does not appear to limit its responsibilities to holding the Superintendent accountable for policy, financial decision-making, and evaluating the Superintendent based on a clear set of goals and district priorities most of which should relate directly to improving student achievement and opportunities for all students. The Board of Education appears to want to assume many of the responsibilities that are exclusively those of the Superintendent as the district's chief executive officer.

2. The communication and planning vehicles in place to plan for ongoing, important school and school district initiatives appear to be loosely coupled. The District DELTA Team and the Administrative Council were mentioned only rarely or in passing in the interviews. Teachers and principals appear to be completely focused on and committed to the tasks they are assigned. The district culture appears to be clouded or muted. Most staff members interviewed were less than hopeful or enthusiastic about the future of the New London Public Schools (everyone was hopeful about children and students, but not the "system"). Positive momentum for ongoing school and school district improvements was almost completely lacking.
3. Limited community engagement and parental involvement was cited throughout the interviews as a significant problem in New London. Efforts to deal with this problem seem sporadic. School Governance Councils are beginning but with inconsistent and limited success. Some Councils are barely functioning at this point. There is no systemwide parent council. This disconnected organizational culture was reflected in a variety of stakeholder interviews.
4. There was little reference to internal accountability forces within the district or to collaborative decision-making around goals, objectives, and directions in general. It was reported that a perception exists that there has not been a sense of collaboration among administrators in the system. The teachers' union seemed particularly concerned about the implementation of the revised educator evaluation process. Directives are perceived to be most often top down. There was considerable concern expressed about the imminent departure of one Central Office administrator who often

mediated the tasks and messages that flow from the Superintendent and the Board. This sense of internal accountability is a critical factor in building the collective commitment necessary for continuous improvement. Confusion or suspicion regarding the role of educational consultants over the recent years surfaced in many interviews. How consultants fit into the District Improvement Plans and what resources are used or diverted to support consultants seems to be an area that needs to be addressed.

5. Reduced resources in the Central Office over time have created the conditions where multiple areas of responsibility are assigned to administrators. For example, the leadership for improving teaching, learning and curriculum needs to be a major focus in the district improvement work, yet the responsibility for leadership in this area is one of many for the Assistant Superintendent. The Business Office and Special Education administrators may be faced with similar challenges.
6. There appears to be little effort to collaborate with community organizations or institutions at the strategic level. Many of these groups make major contributions to the schools in the form of mentors, interns and program enrichment but their influence on school policy and operations is not evident. Some of these institutions could provide significant assistance in gaining new grants, contracts and resources.
7. Over 75% of the students in the New London Public Schools are Black or Hispanic, yet there are few minority teachers in the system and no effective (or even apparent) strategy to recruit more. This is a major shortcoming that affects the district in many ways.

Recommendations:

1. There must be a concerted effort to create the conditions for the Superintendent and the Board to focus their policy and leadership work on the improvement areas most closely associated with improving student performance at scale. **In District Leadership That Works, Striking the Right Balance.** Marzano and Waters present a set of powerful and well established findings on the strong, positive relationship between the Superintendent’s leadership behavior and student achievement include: (These findings should be considered in future New London District Improvement Plans.)
 - a. Effective Superintendents and Boards understand and act upon the need for collaborative decision-making as a key to developing organizational coherence and sustained improvement. Effective district leaders engage all relevant stakeholders including the Board, principals and district administrators in establishing non-negotiable goals for the district.
 - b. The Superintendent and Board establish these non-negotiable goals in two areas, in particular, student achievement and classroom instruction. Principals support these district goals implicitly and explicitly.
 - c. The Board of Education is aligned with and overtly and consistently in support of these district performance goals.
 - d. Effective Superintendents monitor achievement and instruction goals, and use resources to support instruction and achievement goals and regularly report to the Board on progress toward these goals.
2. Given the budget challenges ahead, the departure of the Assistant Superintendent and the ongoing school reorganization plans, this is the time for a comprehensive study of the district and school administrative structure and needs in alignment with Board goals and the District Improvement Plan.

3. The Superintendent should play a key role in collaborating with organizational programs and in initiatives concerning children. Initiatives by the school district to bring these program leaders together and develop coordinated efforts could be beneficial. Likewise, the Superintendent should reach out to the institutions of higher education in the New London area for their advice and influence.
4. The school district needs to establish a clear, understandable set of goals and objectives to communicate better not only to the public but within the governance structure. It also is important to develop and communicate a vision about where the district is going in the next five years. Within the context of a comprehensive District Improvement Plan (perhaps more overarching and high profile than the CSDE mandated plan) the Administration and the Board should have 90-day Action Plans with specific actionable goals, measureable objectives and clear monitoring and reporting procedures. Progress reports should be evidence-based and reported out at regularly scheduled Board meetings. Press releases developed directly from these Board progress reports should also be regularly disseminated.
5. A specific communication plan needs to be developed and implemented clarifying and perhaps celebrating the place of magnet schools and school choice in New London going forward. The positive attributes of this significant community and State investment need to be articulated and the community needs to be informed of the high value that these schools provide for New London students.
6. Some bold thinking should occur around the development of a system-wide school reform model that could involve not only education but social services in a different form. The reform of a single school will not help much, and New London is small enough to reinvent the whole system. Such models do exist and information about them would be useful to not only school officials but the community. Any major reform effort in the New London Public Schools must involve the active participation of City government. This idea, if developed well, could attract external private and public funds for implementation.

7. Creating, managing and articulating the culture of the organization are important responsibilities of the Superintendent. Included here is what the Superintendent values and the ways in which those values are reinforced in the organization. There needs to be a thoughtful and realistic review of the district culture and a clear, well articulated district plan of action.
8. Implement a first class plan to recruit minority teachers and administrators. This plan should not only include colleges and universities that prepare teachers but Alternate Route Certification programs and organizations such as Teach for America.
9. Given the complexity and scope of the challenges faced by the New London Public Schools, the need for a significantly renovated or new high school and the current City government's relationship with the school district's governance structure, we would be remiss not to suggest an exploration of a regional solution. The State's investment in New London's magnet schools along with the significant State investment in other area local and magnet schools and the current enrollment shifts underway in the region make a regional solution worthy of study. The benefits of scale, socio-economic and racial diversity in all schools and a re-vitalized school district culture should not be overlooked.

FINAL NOTE

Many of the problems of New London and the New London School District are the direct result of economic decline and poverty. Connecticut's small cities, like this one, have been relatively neglected, while State attention has focused on problems in the large cities. These cities, although much smaller, have problems most often associated with larger urban centers. It is essential that the State address the core problems in small cities, not only in the schools, if any real progress is to be made and the backward slide into further decline is to be reversed.

Governance and leadership problems in the New London Public Schools go far beyond the usual state and federal solutions associated with educational reform. There is no coordinated leadership in the City and small fiefdoms and various pockets of influence dominate the decision-making processes. It appears that a large part of the community has no connection or interest in the school system. Increasing State direction, increasing training of personnel, increasing standards through testing, and increasing regulations and mandates will not provide enough impact to change New London schools in any but an incremental way. A complete change of direction, attitude and behavior by all elected officials and members of the community is required to overcome the current pattern of decline and loss of confidence in the school system. Community building in support of improving the education of all of New London's children while improving the living conditions for all of New London's citizens should be the focus of any future district improvement plans and any form of State intervention.

Resources

CABE CAPSS School Governance Position Statement. CABE, 2005 & 2007

What School Boards Can Do: Reform Governance for Urban Schools. Donald McAdams, Teachers college Press, 2006.

District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance. R. Marzano & T. Waters, McREL, Solution Tree Press, 2009

Boards That Make A Difference. J. Carver, John Wiley & Sons, 2006

Getting There From Here: School Board-Superintendent Collaboration, Creating A School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement, R. Goodman, W. Zimmerman, Educational Research Services, 1997