

A Working White Paper from the
March 2009 Education Summit

Education That Works: Ideas for Sacramento



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Former Sacramento Mayor Joe Serna, Jr. was well known for saying that you simply cannot have a great city without great schools. That is the reason the late Mayor put his political career on the line to support an education reform movement in the Sacramento City Unified School District. Fourteen years later, while some progress has been made, much work remains to be done before we can say that all of our schools are serving children well.

While all five school districts in Sacramento—Natomas, Elk Grove, Robla, Sacramento City, and Twin Rivers—have made gains over the past decade, far too many Sacramento youth either do not graduate from high school or graduate without the necessary skills to be successful in post-secondary education and careers. A recent study by the California Dropout Research Project using data gathered by the California Department of Education estimated that more than 2,200 middle and high school student dropped out of Sacramento schools in one year.

For this reason, Mayor Kevin Johnson has made supporting education reform and increasing academic success for Sacramento youth a centerpiece of his work as the city's leader. The ability to chart a course for school reform, find the resources and support necessary for the changes, and then execute the plan will require strong leadership, the development of civic capacity and political will. While this is no easy task, the commitment has to be made.

Sacramento should be among the nation's leading cities in pushing education reforms to improve student opportunity and academic achievement. As the capital of California, the city is in a unique position to be at the of school reform and pave the way for the rest of the state and country. Mayor Johnson's goal for school reform is clear: *All city schools will have a strong instructional program, be able to attract and retain the best educators, and provide a broad portfolio of school options.* Sacramento students will be competitive with students anywhere in the state, nation, or world. Innovative and best practices will originate and be replicated in our community. In short, every Sacramento student will have full access to a rigorous curriculum that allows him or her to graduate from high school with the skills and competencies to be successful in the next stage of their lives, whether it is in higher education or a career.

The Mayor's Education Summit on March 9, 2009 was a significant first step toward this goal. At the summit, the Mayor brought nationally renowned educators together to discuss their own work and how their successes and lessons learned can be transferred as Sacramento develops its own plans for success. Each of these leaders — including New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, Chancellor Michelle Rhee from Washington DC, and Newark Mayor Cory Booker as well as executives from the Black Alliance for Educational Options and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) — brought forth their own testimonies about the need to focus on student success and understand that systems and old habits built around the needs of adults must shift. Many of the aforementioned leaders also stressed the pivotal role city leaders can play in education, sharing their experiences in systems with strong mayoral involvement in the public schools. Their stories were inspiring, proving that with focus, persistence, and hard work, low expectations can be overcome, and all students can succeed. These summits should be held regularly so that Sacramento can become known as a hub of debate, discussion and influence within education policy circles.

Traditionally, the City of Sacramento and its leaders have been most involved in "out of school time" hours through community, pre-school, and after school programs. For example, the City of Sacramento currently operates START (pre-school), the 4th R (afterschool) and employee mentoring programs at area schools. The City also partners with districts to run attendance centers in order to help reduce truancy. However, true success and aggressive reforms will require a deep and collaborative effort between the City and the five school districts serving young people within its boundaries, with support and engagement by students, parents, business, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and others. All Sacramentans must understand that they have a critical stake in the achievement of their schools and be prepared to engage in a conversation and activities to ensure success.

Obviously, each of the five school districts has locally elected school boards and appointed superintendents, administrators, teachers, and staff working diligently to increase student success. This paper begins to explore ways in which the City can collaborate with these and other stakeholders to bring additional support, resources, and ultimately, student success, through a variety of venues and forms.

The City can be supportive in a multitude of ways, but five issue areas have been selected as a starting point:

- School Accountability
- Compelling Portfolio of School Choice
- Human Capital
- Engaging and Empowering Parents
- Leveraging External Resources

This paper, developed from the ideas and discussions emanating from the Mayor's Education Summit, is presented as a next step in the education discussion and work of the City. It is by no means exhaustive in its ideas and recommendations. Rather, it is the continuation of a dynamic citywide discussion about how to best reach the goal of success for all students. Educators, parents and concerned citizens met during the summit to discuss how the bold and provocative ideas presented by the national speakers might apply to Sacramento. What follows is a summary of those discussions and implications for Sacramento.

School Accountability

Since the inception of the latest wave of school reform in California approximately 10 years ago, the call for increased accountability for students, teachers, and schools has been continuous. Unfortunately, the state and federal accountability systems are complex and are often not only confusing but may be at odds with one another. To simplify the accountability system so that parents and guardians can easily understand how their child's school is doing, the New York City school system has instituted a School Report card system which assigns A-F letter grades for schools.

These report cards provide a mechanism through which parents and community members can make decisions and determinations for their children based on consistent, clear and objective data. It also holds schools and district accountable to parents for their performance with students.

Clearly, what constitutes a specific grade is a critical decision. Facilitating a community discussion about what parents and guardians think are the most important data elements constituting the school's grade is not only the right thing to do but a way to engage these stakeholders in the educational discussion. In addition, the community should be able to understand whether schools are creating environments that facilitate student achievement, how public dollars are

used, and whether they are holding their own employees accountable for success.

Recommendations for Consideration:

- Compile best practices from around the nation on this issue.
- Convene a community conversation to develop the components of a school and district report card
- Work with districts to understand current practice and what data is available.
- Implement the Report Card yearly before district open enrollment processes begin.

Key Research Questions:

- What are the specific data elements that are most needed by parents?
- What data systems do the district's use?
- What access do parents/guardians currently have?
- What are the obstacles/barriers to making this happen?

Compelling Portfolio of School Choice

Providing parents and guardians with accurate, easy to understand information about their schools and districts is a way to engage them in conversation and facilitate their ability to become actively engaged in their child's education. It will also create a demand for more options for where their children can go to school and what types of programs best match their child's needs.

Educational options can take a variety of forms, including:

- a. *Portfolio of Schools.* Districts around the country have expanded high school offerings to better meet the needs of students and their families. Since 2000, Sacramento City Unified has attempted to expand its high school offerings to include theme-based small learning communities in its comprehensive high schools, as well as opening seven small independent high schools. Where students and their families once had little choice but to attend their traditional, large, comprehensive high school where students could easily fall through the cracks, the choices now include a number of schools.

This type of school choice and portfolio approach should exist at all levels. Options and programs can include dual language immersion, gifted and talented, arts-integration, International Baccalaureate (IB), and STEM programs for elementary and middle grades students.

- b. *Charter Schools and Other Providers.* Public schools come in all shapes and sizes. Charter school systems such as Green Dot, KIPP, and Aspire Public Schools have demonstrated great success around the state and country educating students, particularly those that have not been successful in traditional settings. It is critical that Sacramento creates a welcoming environment for charter school systems with records of successful performance can provide more educational options for students and their families. In cities like New York, Chicago and New Orleans, school districts embrace charter schools and facilitate their growth by offering facilities at no cost and access to district resources. We must create these types of incentives in our city as well.
- c. *Other Alternatives.* Schools and districts around the state and country have been innovative and demonstrated success in creating school partnerships with community-based organizations such as the Conservation Corps as well as with institutes of higher education in creating Early College High Schools.

In each of these alternatives, the goal should always be providing greater educational options of quality and enhancing student achievement.

Recommendations for Consideration:

- Map current educational options in the city.
- Disseminate the educational options listing beginning in January before district open enrollment.
- Assess district approaches to educational options and possible leverages for additional options.
- Approach educational management organizations that have seen success across the state and nation to open schools in

Sacramento or partner in turning around low performing schools.

- Create an “innovation fund” which would provide additional resources to schools interested in starting programs that would broaden choice in the city.

Key Research Questions:

- What do students/parents/guardians want?
- What educational options are currently available?
- What access do parents/guardians currently have to educational options?
- Who should be developing additional options?
- Who are potential partners?
- What are the obstacles/barriers to enhancing educational options for students and their families?

Human Capital

Research shows that the one factor that has the greatest impact on student achievement is teacher quality. This in turn necessitates that school districts and the community attract, develop and retain the very best educators. It will be critical to work with districts to build a reliable ‘pipeline’ for the recruitment of new teachers and principals, provide quality professional development and sufficient resources to all educators, and reward performance..

- a. *Recruitment and Retention.* The City can support the recruitment and retention of quality educators through a number of means. Earlier hiring timelines, aggressive and targeted recruitment campaigns, and innovative pathways into the teaching profession should be pursued as well as strengthening relations with educator development and credentialing programs at local colleges and universities. In addition, the City could establish relationships and act as an intermediary with national teacher recruitment efforts such as Teach For America, the New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools.

- b. *Financial Incentives for Recruitment and Retention.* In attracting and retaining staff, the City can work in a number of areas. For example, providing ways to lower the cost of housing would be attractive to individuals as they compare costs of living across various districts and communities. The City could also provide transportation benefits and use tax rate cuts as incentives.
- c. *Performance Systems and Rewarding Success.* The City could work with the districts to establish a pay for performance system aimed at increasing student achievement. How teachers are developed, evaluated, compensated and rewarded can play a significant role in attracting and retaining the very best teachers.

Recommendations for Consideration:

- Compile best and promising practices from around the nation on this issue.
- Convene district and teachers' union representatives to engage in a discussion on how such reforms might be implemented in Sacramento.
- Bring teachers together for focus groups on how to reward and incent educators
- Create a working group to develop options for the city and districts.

Key Research Questions:

- What methods are in place for teacher recruitment and trainings?
- What partnerships exist that support teacher recruitment and training?
- What can be done within the current collective bargaining agreements between districts and unions in Sacramento?
- Should this be done within those bargaining agreements or in addition to those agreements?
- What are the low-cost, no-cost measures that can be taken?
- What are other measures that can be taken and what will they cost? Is there a source of funding?

The greatest underutilized resources in our school communities are parents. Throughout Sacramento, there are over 90,000 parents who, given the knowledge, resources and training, could and should be the primary advocates for their children and for education reform. This will require, however, that they have access to real-time information in an accessible, open, and user-friendly format about how their children and schools are doing. For example, around the state and country, many schools and districts have adopted internet-based systems that allow parents to know how their children are progressing academically and what homework has been assigned for the day and the week. Parents and guardians can also be notified of school activities and challenges. In addition, parents and guardians are able to get an accurate picture of the status of their child's path towards graduation and completing eligibility requirements for college admission, completing A-G requirements for the University of California and the California State University systems, and other important information.

We should also ensure that parents and guardians have that type of information about the performance of their schools and districts. This will enable them to become better advocates for their children in terms of school choice and policies.

Recommendations for Consideration:

- Compile best practices from the school districts serving Sacramento, from California districts and the nation on this issue.
- Facilitate and support city-wide initiatives geared toward engaging parents in dialogue about critical topics in education such as teacher quality, college readiness and student achievement measures.
- Encourage the expansion or creation of parent advocacy groups who work to inform parents throughout the city about school choice options and achievement levels to create a demand for the change that is necessary in the city.

Key Research Questions:

- What are the specific data elements that are most needed by parents?
- What data systems do the district's use?
- What access do parents/guardians currently have?

Engaging and Empowering Parents

- What are the obstacles/barriers to making this happen?
- What parent groups and programs are currently active?

Leveraging External Resources

The City and its leadership have the ability to bring additional resources to students and schools, both in the form of financial and human resources. A number of opportunities exist, including:

- Federal Stimulus Funds.* The federal government has made a huge commitment both to education and the states by dedicating additional stabilization funds and grant funding to schools. The “Race to the Top” fund sets aside \$5 billion in competitive grants to districts and states willing to take on major innovations. The City should immediately take the lead in organizing local districts to apply for these grants as there is significant overlap with our areas of focus and the administration’s reform priorities. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been clear that “Race to the Top” funds will only be awarded to cities who have utilized state stabilization funds to drive new ideas and reform.
- Philanthropic and Business Funds.* Philanthropy and business seek to invest in leadership, innovation, and projects that facilitate significant opportunities for success. In bringing the disparate aspects of the educational community together around a set of unifying goals, the City’s schools will present a greatly enhanced set of investment opportunities for both philanthropy and business. Large funders such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation and others are specifically supporting efforts in other cities where the Mayor has taken a more active role in pushing an aggressive education reform agenda. These foundations have already contributed to the education summit in Sacramento and are eager to be involved in further discussions about the direction of the city’s initiatives.
- Finding New and Reorienting Current City Resources.* Beyond the City’s Office of Youth Development Office and Department of Parks and Recreation, the City has the ability to look

at all of its services and better understand how each department could support enhanced student success. Whether providing internships, mentors, community service opportunities, or doing school visits on career day, City employees should be thinking out how the work they do can have a positive impact on the city’s youth.

Recommendations for Consideration:

There is a need to create a sustained infrastructure to carry out this ambitious mission over time and leverage the appropriate external resources. The City should support the creation of a local intermediary (501(c) 3 non-profit organization) to serve in this capacity. The benefits to such an intermediary are not only in providing economies of scale in numerous areas, but as the entity that brings the districts and communities together around a common set of goals in the five areas described above. The intermediary could perform (but not be limited to) the following types of tasks:

- Hire a liaison between school districts and City Hall
- Raise additional resources that can be dedicated to education reform in the city
- Work with external organizations such as Teach for America, City Year, the New Teacher Project and New Leaders for New Schools to facilitate their endeavors in Sacramento
- Create and disseminate city-wide School Report Cards
- Facilitate the nation’s first multi-district pay for performance program for teachers
- Work with the business and the larger community around internships and mentoring opportunities
- Look for collaborative ways to save resources where size matters – purchasing health and other insurance, purchasing supplies, home to school transportation, etc.
- Facilitate opportunities for districts to work together on best practices on a variety of topics through the creation of professional learning communities and professional development opportunities. These might include professional development, working with English Language Learners, turning around low performing schools, etc.

Key Research Questions:

- How can seed funding for the third party entity be raised?
- How should this entity be structured to best leverage the resources and liaise with City Hall?
- Who should make decisions about how any new funds are spent?
- Will this compete with individual district efforts and is that a problem?

Additional Discussion Items

A number of items surfaced during the summit that do not fall into one of the five focus areas above, but are being highlighted for further discussion. These include the following:

- Expanding High Quality Preschool and Early Childhood Education Programs.* Studies show that children who participate in preschool have measurably better life outcomes than children who are not afforded this opportunity. Our goal as a City should be to ensure every child has access to a high quality early childhood program. In order to achieve this goal, the number of pre-K seats will need to be increased. The City can work with community with public schools and based organizations to explore options to expand programs.
- Increasing Support for Arts Education.* Students who have exposure to a wide-ranging curriculum that includes rigorous, discipline-based art perform better academically, yet in many schools across Sacramento arts education is disappearing. The City can play a critical role in engaging the school districts and the broader arts community in a dialogue about how to support arts education at all grade levels through leveraging existing funds, pursuing philanthropic dollars and better utilizing existing resources.
- Growing Internship and Work Study Opportunities.* In order to ensure our young people have options and opportunities in life, they need to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to be successful in the twenty-first century and in order to have a thriving economy, a well-education workforce is needed. Not only do our schools need to be

structured and resourced such that all students have the choice to attend four-year college or enter the work-force in skilled, well-paying jobs upon graduation, more opportunities need to be provided for students to explore career options and gain hands-on job experience. The City can collaborate with local businesses, industry, youth-employment programs and school districts to identify the skills and knowledge demonstrated in productive workers, better align curriculum, and increase the number of internships and summer jobs available to youth.

- Bolster Afterschool Programs.* A significant number of Sacramento youth are not yet achieving at grade level or on track for college. For many of these youth, more learning time is needed to help them “catch up” and reach their academic potential. Whether students need remedial academic assistance or enrichment, all of our young people can benefit from spending more time engaged in productive afterschool activities. The City can work with districts, community-based organizations and City departments such as Youth Development and Parks and Recreation to establish additional after school activities that help school-aged children improve their academic and life skills.
- Community Service.* Creating “a city that works for everyone” requires the participation of all citizens. This includes our young people. The City can lead an initiative that encourages all students to engage in a minimum number of volunteer hours yearly and explore the potential of community service as a graduation requirement. In playing a leadership role, the City could work with local nonprofits and community organizations to identify meaningful ways to serve as well as and help youth understand the value of “giving back”.

Conclusion and Next Steps

An ambitious agenda beginning with the one presented above will require dedicated leadership, a devoted set of actors and significant resources. However, there is nothing more important that we can undertake as a city than ensuring the quality of the public schooling we provide to our children.