

CASE STUDY: NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey,
“Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

Today’s urban school districts are challenged not only by the socioeconomic factors that fuel inequalities, but also by the language of pain heard so often in the voices of the poor. When those voices are met with indifference, it creates an adversarial climate conducive only to education reform by disruption. For those school district leaders who view the value of public engagement on a nuisance meter, both transparency and collaboration have high ratings and therefore, are routinely ignored. Instead, governing through a silver-bullet approach—say, adapting everything to a business model—has become a political solution for “fixing” things that need a more-enduring cure.

In an unparalleled national effort to support targeted accountability—aimed almost exclusively at disadvantaged communities and their classrooms—mayors and governors continue to lobby for the control of schools and their funding, but in the end bear little to no responsibility for their fate. With public engagement, transparency and collaboration seen as

virtues of past, more muscular approaches have been flexing their way through city halls and state legislatures. Despite growth in the business model of governance, there has been little yield in making a case for change. For too many district leaders and their partners, it has become simply a matter of what you believe and not what you know, while students, teachers, and families are left floundering waiting for the next wave of reform to be imposed. In Newark, I took a different path and implemented a new strategy.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

While I had ten years of experience as a superintendent when arriving in Newark, I was an outsider. Yet, not being a “Newarker” was not always a curse, sometimes it was a blessing. Not being from Newark afforded me leadership insights into seemingly frozen policies in critical areas such as student attendance, sports, college/work readiness, and advanced placement courses, all of which were areas essential to the reclamation work

begun by my predecessors. I was an outsider, yet I had insider urban leadership pedagogy that led me to embrace a public engagement framework that involved community engagement as a strategy for problem solving; and community engagement as a resource to build civic capacity.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

By thinking in terms of system change, vetted through community conversations and affirmed after debate at advisory board meetings, I was able to enact policies that had a chance to survive and flourish. A principle for building relationships that were aligned with system change promoted the understanding that tolerance of dissent is an attitude that is learned; but when it is perceived as disingenuous, it can contribute weightily to disruption. Even when the dissent is arguably unfair and personal, district leaders cannot choose to vacate their seat at the table. And neither toleration of dissent, nor outright disregard for it, are acceptable rationales for dishonoring the advisory authority of an elected school board. By contrast, inclusive public engagement is deliberately transparent and promotes opportunities for problem solving, as does inclusive leadership. Courting conflict and taking heavy dosages of me-too-ism, guarantee the erosion of “public” in public education.

An advisory board is a unique thing. Its legal authority over consequential decisions regarding budgets, union and service contracts, and so on, was consultative, and their vote was not legally binding. In fact, the superintendent had the authority to override and or change the advisory vote of the school board. However, it was a mistake to underestimate the board’s political clout. With some exceptions, advisory board members saw their role as legitimate advocates of support for public education in Newark, and connected

daily with other public elected officials. During budget deliberations, it was a mighty challenge for them to suspend feelings of grief and loss about board-supported programs that had achieved only limited success.

However, working with the corporate community, I was able to bring to the district an innovative, sustainable initiative that required no financial contribution from the State of New Jersey or the City of Newark. Developing authentic partnerships with the academic, corporate, and social service communities became essential to the work ahead. For example, the partnership which began in 2010 was between The Newark Public Schools and Public Service Electric and Gas Company of New Jersey (PSE&G) recognized the intersection of interests between career plans for Newark students, environmental challenges, and innovative leadership on the part of Ralph Larosa, CEO of PSE&G. The model program afforded no cost to the district and would reduce carbon emission through the installation of solar panels that were housed on the roofs of five schools. In effect, the carbon footprint would be reduced by three thousand tons of carbon dioxide per year. In addition, more than four hundred local homes in the area of the designated schools benefitted from this nontraditional partnership. Students benefitted as well by learning to design, install and maintain solar panels under the tutelage of staff from a local minority business.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A RESOURCE TO BUILD CIVIC CAPACITY

In an already crowded and competitive landscape for talent, Newark had been existing within the state administrative boundaries as a dependent district for well over a decade. I chose to begin my tenure with an inclusive plan, holding a town hall meeting where every employee, no matter what position, could attend, as they all were acknowledged as important contributors

to the education of our children, welfare of our families, and the renaissance of our community. Over seven thousand employees and community activists attended this historic convocation. In reflection, Lucille Davy, former Education Commissioner for the State of New Jersey, commented that she herself never had an experience like this. She said “it is rather overwhelming to see all seven thousand plus of you make magic this year. . . . If teachers are going to truly prepare students for the future, they need support from everyone.” A teacher, Fathiyyah Salaam-Mott, at American History High School, expressed her optimism this way: “I look forward to [Janey] putting everything in place that he talked about. I hope it works out the way he plans, and I hope everyone is on board.”

Over the next several months, I established with the support from the school board and the community a series of round table community conversations to lay out the critical issues and pathways for success in schools, and families without economic security. The series of round table conversations led by school and parent leaders was intended to listen to every voice keeping in mind the counsel of Salaam-Mott, “I hope everyone is on board.” That every voice should matter at all in increasingly power-centric education reform environments was indeed a radical idea then and still is now. I can recall and being approached by a first time participant who asked, “Doc, I am allowed to speak?” I said reassuringly, “of course, and let me know how things go.” During the course of conversations across the city over five hundred voices were heard whose context became the framework of Newark’s first comprehensive strategic plan Great Expectations.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

During my tenure of the Newark public schools, I helped boost high school math scores by 10 percentage points. From 2009 to 2011, the percentage of high school students passing state language arts increased by 14.8

percentage points,¹ and the proportion passing state math tests increased by 8.3 percentage points. Among students in grades 3-8, Newark students outpaced the gains of students statewide in four of six grades in mathematics.

Clifford B. Janey is a senior research scholar at Boston University’s School of Education. He was state district superintendent of Newark, New Jersey, from 2008 to 2011; superintendent of schools in Washington, D.C., from 2004 to 2007; and superintendent of schools in Rochester, New York, from 1995 to 2002. He has also been a Senior Weismann Fellow at Bankstreet College of Education in New York City, as well as vice president of education at Scholastic, Inc.

Notes

¹ Patrick L. Kennedy, “Beating the Odds,” Boston University School of Education, Spring/Summer 2012, 2.