



# Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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## CHAPTER 2

## Sustaining School District Success: An Urban Superintendent's Reflections

*Arlene Ackerman*

### No Silver Bullets

As an educator with more than three decades of K-12 experience, I have spent most of my career developing and implementing systemic strategies designed to improve academic achievement for students who attend urban public schools. As a teacher, principal and district administrator, I have participated in numerous reform initiatives intended to boost achievement. Unfortunately, few of these initiatives manage to sustain student achievement increases over time.

Something is always missing. The progression of instructional, structural and governance reforms are always sold as the answer to what ails public education. Regrettably, time and time again, educators fall prey to the latest single answer solution only to be frustrated with the long term results. The silver bullet approach to improving achievement is misguided. No single solution can guarantee success. There are no quick fixes. What I know now is that without a coherent plan which includes strategic alignment of academic initiatives, fiscal and human resources and accountability systems, it will be difficult for any school district to improve and sustain achievement over time.

This chapter will provide readers with some insights into one district's efforts to improve academic performance for all children through the implementation of a coherent and integrated set of reform strategies. The San Francisco Unified School District has enjoyed six consecutive years of achievement progress and three years as the highest performing large urban school system in California. Here is our story.

### Excellence for All – A Strategic Academic Plan

After listening to hundreds of parents, teachers, administrators, students and community members, it became evident that to change academic outcomes for students, the San Francisco school system needed a coherent plan. Thus, in the fall of 2000, the district embarked upon an important journey that began with a rational strategy that would eventually lead to positive results for children.

Central to the development of that plan, however, were five core beliefs:

1. Children come first.
2. Parents are our partners.
3. Victory is in the classroom.
4. Leadership and accountability are the keys to our success.
5. It takes the entire community to ensure the success of the public schools.

*Excellence for All*, the strategic plan, aligned and focused all reform initiatives on three guiding principles; improving achievement for all students by raising the bar and closing the performance gap; ensuring the equitable allocation of all resources; and, implementing accountability systems for students and adults.

By clearly articulating the core beliefs; guiding principles; and academic goals, then linking these to new policies, instructional initiatives and structural changes outlined in the *Excellence for All* document, the district laid critical groundwork for an educational roadmap that would drastically change achievement outcomes for all groups of students.

## **A Policy Framework for Change**

In San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), the policy framework that was incorporated in the development of *Excellence for All* included the following set of beliefs about organizational reform in our system:

1. School choice is an important aspect of providing excellence for all students and their families. Therefore, there must be good schools in every neighborhood.
2. The people closest to the students (principals, teachers and parents) are capable of making good decisions for them.
3. The role of central office should be to clearly define the “what” (standards, curriculum, performance criteria, intervention processes and system-wide accountability) and these should be non-negotiable.
4. Schools should have the autonomy to decide the “how” (who to hire, what programs work best and how to spend the budget so that it is aligned with a clear academic site plan).
5. All schools should be accountable annually for student results.
6. Schools that fail to make consistent progress must be provided with additional support by providing targeted interventions and closer monitoring.
7. The primary responsibility of central office administration is to provide service and support to schools. Evaluations for central office should be linked to the success of schools.

This policy framework helped SFUSD clearly align all reform strategies within a conceptual structure which defined the responsibilities of central administration as well as the district’s schools. The plan outlined a role for central administration to manage certain elements of the instructional core like, standards, curriculum, and accountability criteria; while, schools were empowered to make decisions about how they would meet the student performance measures through the site-based decision-making, academic planning and budgeting processes. Finally, when schools failed to meet the performance targets, instead of sanctions, principals and teachers were given specific additional resources and more frequent monitoring of progress.

## **The Academic Link**

In many districts, structural and operational changes are usually implemented in isolation from academic reform initiatives. However, when San Francisco implemented the Weighted Student Formula

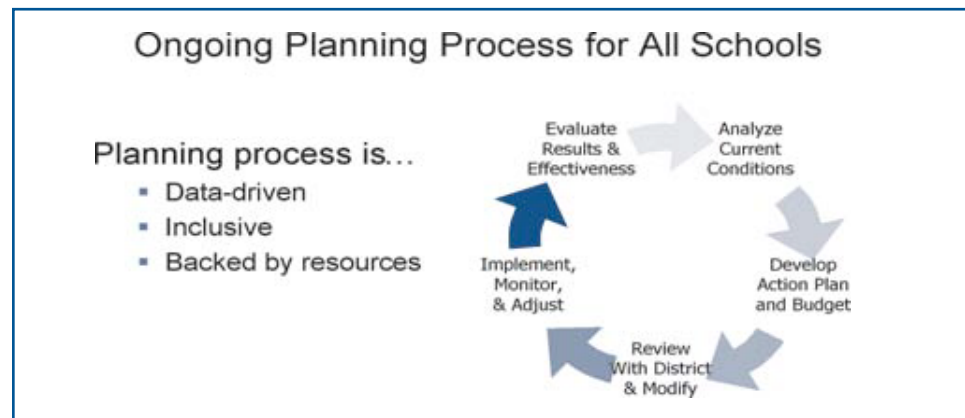
(WSF), a budget allocation methodology which distributes dollars to schools based on specific student characteristics, the new initiative was linked closely to the district's academic goals.

The academic planning process at each school began with a review of the student performance data from the previous year. Next, the site based governance team (comprised of the principal, teachers, parents and sometimes students) worked together to make staffing decisions, prioritize academic services and programs, then introduce new interventions that might promote higher achievement outcomes. Only after this extensive review process of the instructional program did the schools propose a budget that was aligned with the academic plan. (fig,1) Consequently, school plans were prepared, reviewed, revised and approved more thoughtfully. To further ensure accountability, academic plans were linked to the principals' evaluations and then used to inform the district instructional decisions and budget planning process.

### A Cultural Change in the District

The successful implementation of *Excellence for All* and the theory of action previously discussed required a cultural change especially in our school system. In many districts, most decisions are tightly controlled by the central administration. When SFUSD decided to move to a site-based decision-making system it required a cultural change in our central office.

**Figure 1**



The transformation process required a more supportive and efficient central administration. Academic and operational departments had to learn to work more cooperatively to provide training, give accurate budget information, review and disseminate performance data related to the academic planning process in order to ensure the schools were successful in attaining their goals. It was the first time that human resources, budget and facilities staff members worked hand in hand with their colleagues on the instructional side of the district to serve the needs of principals and site teams. Serving together in cross functional teams, the central office staff learned to discuss and evaluate each school's academic plan. This new review process also allowed central office departments to clearly understand how their work directly supported student achievement.

"What gets measured gets done" is an old adage that had important meaning in SFUSD's reform efforts. To measure the quality of support provided by central office departments, principals and site governance teams were surveyed annually. The survey results provided input for improving the

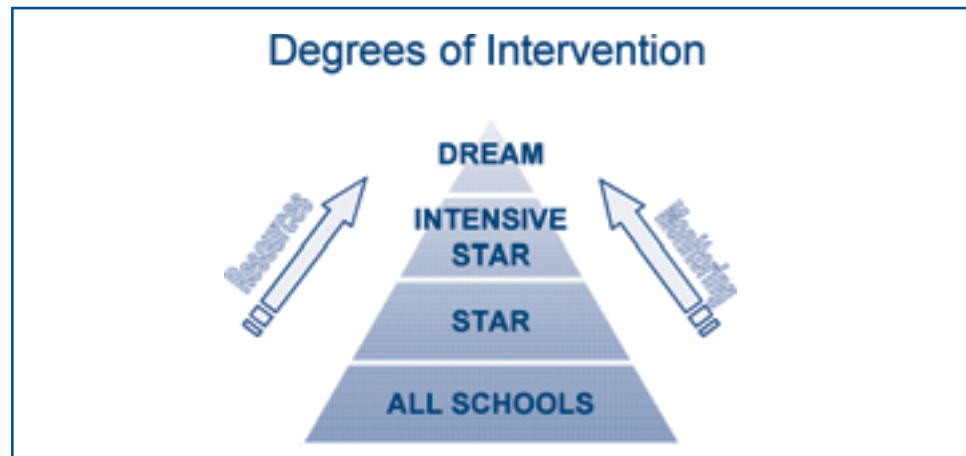
delivery of services to schools. The implementation of our strategic academic plan changed the culture of central office. Indeed, administrative departments became more service-oriented, customer friendly in order to better support school sites.

## Helping Struggling Schools

We all know that improving achievement does not happen by accident or overnight. As previously stated, comprehensive and integrated reform strategies require that all other district resources and operations be aligned to support the goal of academic success. Additionally, there must be ways to provide intervention for struggling schools and monitor improvement more frequently.

In SFUSD, instead of giving struggling schools sanctions when they failed to meet performance goals, the *Excellence for All* strategic plan took an alternative approach by providing tiered interventions, targeted resources and closer monitoring. (fig.2)

**Figure 2**



In fact, a district review of the schools with large numbers of low-achieving students revealed some commonalities. What these schools lacked were coordinated resources to support the needs of a specific population of students whose instructional challenges were often related to larger societal culprits like poverty, violence, and lack of health care.

To change the student outcomes, underperforming schools were given tiered interventions. Some of the targeted resources included nurses, social workers, parent outreach workers and standard-based homework packets designed for parents to use with students on weekends and school breaks. Additionally, to better support the needs of staff each school was provided with a teacher coach, full time on-site substitute teachers and tailored professional development. The STAR (Students and Teachers Achieving Results) program was implemented with a focused objective: to increase the achievement of schools with large numbers of students who were underperforming by providing targeted interventions designed to address barriers that interfered with the process of teaching and learning.

Only after these low achieving schools were given additional support from central administration for two years and failed to show significant progress was a more drastic intervention considered. The Dream Schools initiative was the final option offered to parents as a way to accelerate student

achievement in chronically underperforming schools. Bound by the guiding principles of commitment, inspiration and excellence, the goal of re-opening failing schools as Dream Schools was to hasten increased academic achievement by ensuring that the instructional programs embodied the qualities of the best and highest performing schools in the San Francisco public and private community. The ultimate goal of establishing Dream Schools was to give to our most disadvantaged students (starting in preschool) a rigorous instructional program supported by opportunities to remediate and accelerate their learning and achievement. It is also clear that success in school is a compilation of what is learned inside and outside the classroom. Thanks to the generosity of some very special San Franciscans, Dream School students were exposed to an array of enrichment activities including but not limited to fencing, tennis, photography, golf, instrumental music, creative arts, mentoring and college readiness support.

### Sustaining Progress

Almost seven years ago, San Francisco implemented Excellence for All, a strategic plan which aligned the academic initiatives, fiscal and human resources and district-wide accountability systems. Since then, the district has experienced six consecutive years of improved achievement at all levels; scores higher than the state average on standard-based tests. Indeed, this success in performance distinguished San Francisco Unified as the highest performing large urban district in the state of California for three consecutive years. In 2005, the district was one of five school district finalists to receive recognition as a Broad Prize for Excellence in Public Education.

I completed my tenure as superintendent of schools in June, 2006. And, while these performance gains are laudable, I realize that there is still much work to do in the district to close the achievement gap and make schools in every neighborhood viable choices for students and their families.

Will SFUSD sustain its progress? Only time will tell. Thus far, it has taken the dedication and commitment of the district teachers, administrators, support staff and the board of education to attain these positive outcomes. What I know for sure is that the integrated reform strategies executed in *Excellence for All* and, the subsequent progress made in student achievement over an extended period of time was strategic by design.

I am convinced the academic gains will continue if the district is able to keep an unrelenting focus on improving student achievement coupled with accountability systems, strategic instructional planning and the alignment of all resources as the core of its comprehensive reform strategy. More importantly, I know that if progress can be sustained in the diverse San Francisco Unified School District, it can happen in any urban school system in this country.