

WHITE PAPER

PATHWAYS TO HIGH PERFORMANCE: TURNING AROUND UNDERPERFORMING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Introduction

A 2006-07 school year survey of nearly 100,000 public schools across the country found approximately 2.3 percent in need of “improvement restructuring.”¹ In 2009, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) estimated that percentage would double to five percent in 2010.²

The goal of the current Administration is to reform 5,000 of the nation’s lowest performing schools within five years. In making the announcement, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan highlighted what was at stake, saying the nation “must address the needs of children who have long been ignored and marginalized in chronically low-achieving schools ... if we are to put an end to stubborn cycles of poverty and social welfare, and put our country on track for long-term economic prosperity.”³

Although there are many theories and approaches about how to turn around low-performing schools, there is little scientifically rigorous evidence. There are however, solid examples of successful school turnaround efforts. We, the authors of this paper, were privileged to participate on the same leadership team in a particular high-profile school district turnaround. While our experience confirms there is not one single guaranteed formula for success, there do appear to be certain essential elements -- we call them “fundamental imperatives” -- that must be present if there is to be any chance of school turnaround success at all. They are:

¹ Mapping America’s Educational Progress, 2008, US Dept. of Ed., <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/results/progress/nation.html>.

² State Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts, Dr. Mariana Haynes, NASBE Policy Update, June 2009.

³ U.S. Dept. of Ed. press release, <http://www2.ed.gov/print/news/pressreleases/2009/08/08262009.html>

- Leadership imperatives,
- Instructional imperatives, and
- Environmental imperatives.

Turning around low-performing schools requires strong leadership committed to the turnaround effort, a well-thought out plan of execution to begin meeting higher academic standards, a data-driven instructional framework to set forth how those standards will be achieved, a process for obtaining buy-in from all stakeholders, and reliable assessment tools for measuring progress against goals and making course adjustments along the way.

Our Experience at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (CMS) is currently the 20th largest school district in the U.S. The district was the 26th largest during the years we served on the Board (Arthur Griffin Jr., Board member, 1985-1997 and Board Chairman, 1997-2002) and in the Superintendent's office (Dr. James Pughsley, Deputy Superintendent, 1996-2002; Superintendent, 2002-2005).

The district had a long history of racial equity difficulties and a record of low academic performance that culminated in a devastating defeat of a school bond issue in 1995. Approximately two-thirds of CMS students were meeting state reading standards in 1996, and there was a significant achievement gap, with only about 40 percent of the district's African-American students performing at grade level in reading and math.

Beginning in 1996, the Board and the administration set out together to see if a way could be found to ensure that all CMS students, regardless of race or family income level, had the opportunity to receive a solid education -- one that would prepare them for either college-level study at one of North Carolina's institutions of higher learning or for success in the workforce.

We established clear goals but had no real model to guide us in achieving them, and so made many mistakes. But with persistence and a great deal of hard work from many people, we began to see our efforts pay off where it mattered most -- in the academic achievement levels of our students.

The percentage of Grade 5 African-American students reading at level rose 32 points between 1995 and 2001, from 38 to 70 percent, while the percentage of Grade 5 white students reading to standard rose from 80 to 94 percent. As a result, the achievement gap closed by 18 percent. Results for math scores were similar, and the improvements extended to Grades 3 and 4 for both math and reading.

Success breeds success, and CMS began to attract national attention for its accomplishments, including being named as a finalist for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education, the nation's largest prize given to a single school district.

The credit for the CMS turnaround belonged not to us, but to everyone in the district and the community who worked so hard to achieve it. One of the key lessons we learned, in fact, is that long-term success in bringing a troubled school or district up to speed is all about teaming and

systems, not individuals. Success is impossible without the complete and coordinated support of the Board, the administration, the principals, teachers, staff, students, parents, community leaders - indeed every person with a stake in ensuring our kids a first class education -- and that means everyone who cares about the future of our nation and its place on the world stage.

The Overall Goal -- Improved and Sustained Student Achievement

Many moving parts have to work together seamlessly and must operate with precision for a school turnaround to be successful. And it is vital that throughout the process everyone understands and focuses on the overriding goal -- improving student achievement -- which is the key to changing a culture of failure into one of success.

The definition of a “troubled” or failing school is technically one in which there has been inadequate growth in student achievement over three to five years. On the elementary and middle school levels, this means reading, literacy and math scores consistently below state standards. For high schools, lack of achievement is defined primarily by inadequate test scores and drop-out rates.

But the day-to-day reality of a failing school goes beyond the numbers and infects the entire community in which the school is located. Just as success breeds success, failure breeds a culture of failure. Parents lose faith in the school, teachers are not inspired and students are not engaged or motivated to learn. It is the initial, arduous task of climbing out of this well of despair that makes school turnarounds so difficult to achieve -- and why any turnaround based on gradual improvement is doomed to failure.

Expeditious, dramatic and sustained improvement in student achievement is what sets the stage and forms the core of any successful school or system turnaround. There, too, the results go beyond the numbers. Early and fast improvements show the doubters it can be done and encourages them to buy in to the process. Attitudes improve, hope is kindled, and both teachers and students become inspired. The school becomes a place where students want to go and their parents want to send them, where teachers and administrators look forward to coming to work every day. The school becomes -- instead of a symbol of failure -- a positive place of opportunity and hope for the future.

The Fundamental Imperatives

Based on our experience at CMS and since as consultants to other struggling school districts, we believe the fundamental imperatives that must be present for this kind of success to occur and be maintained over time fall into three primary categories:

- Leadership imperatives;
- Instructional imperatives; and
- Environmental imperatives.

All three are essential for success and must work seamlessly together. They are like the three legs of a stool. If any one of them fails, the stool cannot stand.

Leadership Imperatives

The vital importance of leadership in turning around struggling schools⁴ has been documented repeatedly over the past 30 years. It is the one element of turnaround success on which all education experts appear to agree.⁵

In a turnaround situation, a clear vision and persistent execution on the part of leaders at every level -- from the board to the individual teachers in the classrooms -- is essential. Leadership in this case must be viewed as a team sport, with precisely delineated roles and everyone working together toward a single goal -- improving student achievement.

Board Leadership: A resilient board determined to stay the course in support of reform is a given. Success in turning around low-performing schools increases exponentially with a board that clearly understands its role in establishing the goals, setting the tone, formulating a well thought-out theory of action, and acting in a way for others in the process to emulate. The board needs to work in concert with the district's administration, particularly when it comes to supporting school principals who have been hired to effect rapid change, insulating them from political distractions that might derail the reform process. At no time should there be any discernable light between the actions or statements of the board and those of the superintendent's office, while each maintains its appropriate separation of authority -- governance vs. administration. Board leadership also plays a substantive role in engaging the community and stakeholders around issues involving the scale-up and sustainability of individual school and overall district turnaround efforts.

Superintendent Leadership: As leader of the turnaround challenge, the superintendent's emphasis must be upon leadership and not day-to-day management of the turnaround effort. The superintendent must first establish the turnaround as a district priority. He or she must communicate a sense of urgency and a data-driven call to action. It is then the superintendent's responsibility to: set aligned, rigorous standards for curriculum and instruction; establish high expectations for student achievement, and promote systems that provide for frequent student assessment and continuous professional development of principals and teachers. The superintendent must focus on developing the capacity of school leadership teams by implementing systems for attracting and retaining quality staff, principals and teachers. Once people and plans for improvement are in place and running,

⁴ See *School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organization Improvement*, by Public Impact for the Center on Innovation and Improvement (2007) and *Turnarounds with New Leaders and Staff* by Kowal and Hassel of Public Impact for the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006).

⁵ Whiteside, V.B. (2006), *Meeting the challenges of No Child Left Behind; how an inner-city middle school succeeded*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Fordham Univ.; Picucci, A.C., et al. (2002a), *Driven to succeed: high-performing high schools.*, Univ. of Texas at Austin, The Charles A. Dana Center; Rhim, I.M., Kowal, J.M., Hassel, B.C. and Hassel, E.A. (2007), *School Turnarounds: a review of the cross-sector evidence on dramatic organizational improvement*, Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, and Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute; Duke, D. (n.d.), *Keys to sustaining successful school turnaround*, unpublished manuscript, Charlottesville, VA: Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education; Johnson, J.F. and Asera, R. (Eds) (1999), *Hope for urban education: a study of nine high-performing, high-poverty urban elementary schools*, Wash. D.C.,: Policy Studies Associates and the University of Texas at Austin, The Charles A. Dana Center.

superintendent leaders must also be willing and able to quickly discard policies and programs that are not working and quickly replace them with ones that could be more successful. They also need to provide support to turnaround principals who have a similar impatience with programs that are not delivering results quickly.

Principal Leadership: Turnaround principals are a breed apart. They exhibit special skills and qualities essential to the turnaround effort at the level of the individual school. No leadership position is more vital to a successful result, and there is no evidence of any successful school turnaround without effective principal leadership. Reform principals must be results-driven and display a quiet and yet robust confidence. They must be the kind of people who enjoy and are inspired by the opportunity to address a challenge. They should view their primary task as quickly improving teacher competency and student achievement, not their own survival at the school in the long run. Resistance to change is a given in any turnaround situation. The turnaround principal must be able to handle conflict -- not as a personal attack -- but as the price of being an effective change agent. Most important, turnaround principals must have the freedom and the authority -- backed up by the superintendent and board -- to hire the administrative and teaching staff they need to achieve a dramatic, deep and swift transformation in the school's culture. "One of the best ways for the district to support principals in their turnaround efforts is to give them the 'big yes' over critical decisions up-front."⁶

Teacher Leadership: Teachers have the greatest direct impact on student achievement and the value of effective teachers becomes even more pronounced at high-poverty and academically challenged schools.⁷ Effective teacher leaders demonstrate a command in the teaching process itself with a creative yet faithful allegiance to the school's instructional framework. It is important to keep in mind when selecting teachers for a turnaround situation that true effectiveness is not always a matter of degrees or years of experience. Just as important is energy, self-determination, a focus on professional development and -- most important of all -- a constant reflection on what works best combined with a willingness to adapt. Being an effective teacher also calls for leadership beyond the classroom. As a respected turnaround team member, effective teachers must be prepared to step up to a leadership role -- to share their knowledge with other teachers and collaborate in the school's decision-making process. Of course, they should be compensated for responsibilities beyond the classroom, and be willing to be held accountable for results.

Instructional Imperatives

Vital to the success of a school turnaround is a well-executed instructional framework that has as its sole objective the improvement of student academic achievement. The framework presented

⁶ Kowal, J., Hassel, E.A., & Hassel, B.C. *Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders*, Issue Brief, Sept. 14, 2009, p. 4., The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.

⁷ *Teachers for School Turnarounds: Competencies for Success and Teachers for School Turnarounds: Selection Toolkit*, a report by Public Impact for The Chicago Public Education Fund, 2008, p.3.

here is based on proven practices and, if holistically implemented by effective teachers, will engage students, help them learn, and raise their scores.

The four components of this framework constitute a set of expectations that function in an interdependent and complementary fashion.

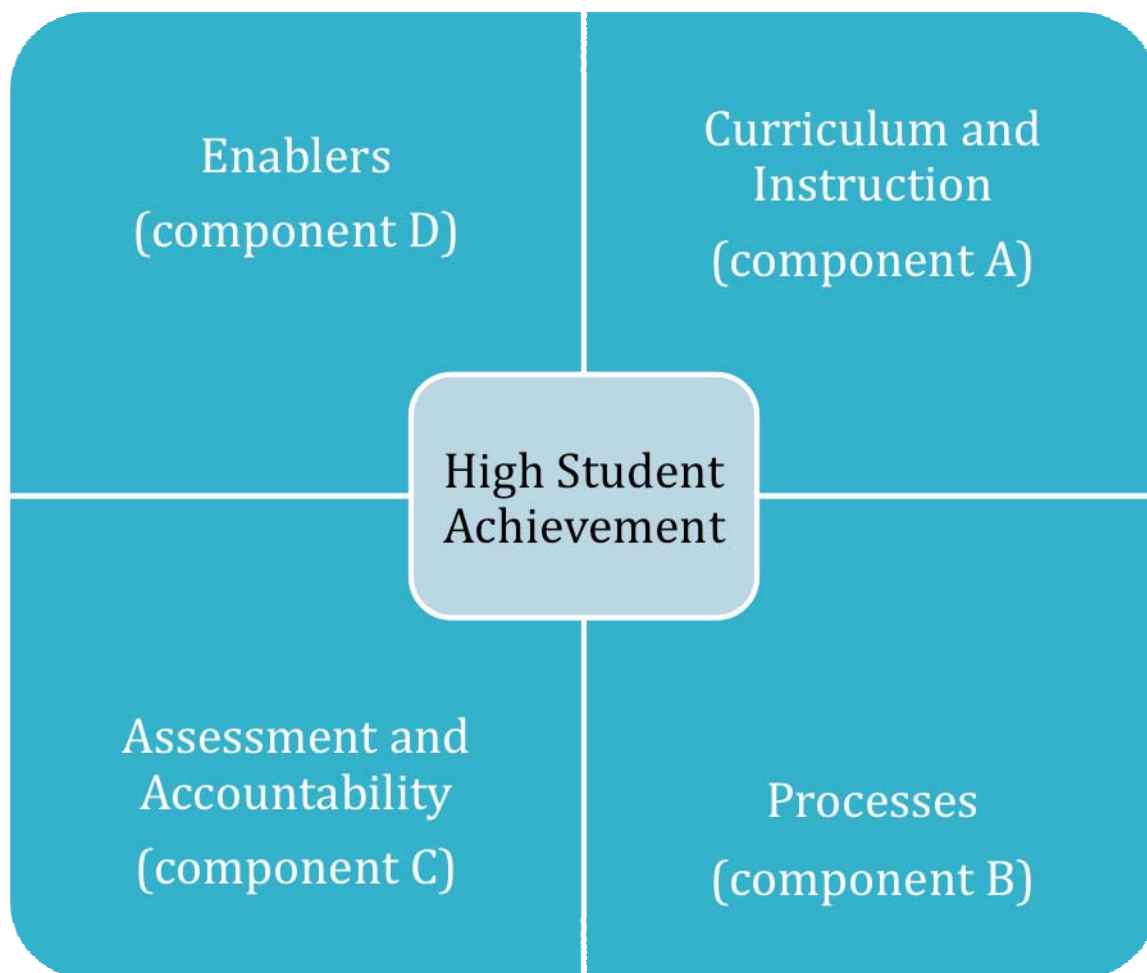
There are 21 sets of expectations clustered into the four components: Curriculum and Instruction (Component A), Processes (Component B), Assessment and Accountability (Component C), and Enablers (Component D), as seen in the accompanying graph.

A. Curriculum and Instruction: Rigor. Pedagogy. Pacing Guides. Differentiated Instruction. Alignment. Interventions, Maintenance and Enrichment. Extended Day/Year. Knowledge of Student Growth and Development.

B. Processes: Plan, Individual and Common Planning; Do, Creativeness and rigor with regard to pedagogy; Check, use of common assessments; Act, data- driven decisions for rapid interventions, maintenance and enrichment.

C. Assessments and Accountability: Formative assessments, Summative assessments, Aligned personnel evaluation systems.

D. Enablers: Mass Collaboration. Classroom management techniques and respect for students. Professional Development. Mentoring and coaching. Pay for performance. Professional reflection.]



Curriculum and Instruction: A rigorous curriculum based on solid pedagogy and aligned with state standards is a must. After that, there must be pacing guides, so teachers know what they are expected to accomplish and when. Instruction should be differentiated to be appropriate to a wide variety of student learning styles and abilities. There must be a formal process for intervention, not only so that struggling students can keep up, but also so that students making adequate progress can maintain what they've learned, and exceptional students can take advantage of opportunities for enrichment.

Processes: Our process model at CMS was Dr. W. Edwards Deming's "Plan-Do-Check-Act" cycle: Plan (individual and common planning for all possible outcomes); Do (creativity and rigor with regard to pedagogy); Check (make use of frequent common assessments -- mini, quarterly and end-of-year); and Act (make quick, data-driven decisions for rapid interventions, maintenance, and enrichment).

Assessment and Accountability: Assessment for students and accountability for everyone else -- teachers, principals, administrative personnel and the board.

Assessment: There must be frequent formative assessment to ensure students are on track and learning at the proper pace to finish the curriculum on schedule. Summative

assessments can be used as baselines and guideposts along the way -- also to satisfy state and federal requirements and show progress. Aligned personnel evaluation systems are required to ensure that everyone is on the same page and working toward the same goal, using the same language and metrics.

Accountability: At CMS, we pioneered the use of a Harvard Business School-developed management system called the Balanced Scorecard™. The term “balanced” comes from the system’s four educational adapted perspectives – financial; business operations/processes; customer/student focus; and learning/growth results – and the insistence that all four be in balance in a complementary fashion. The scorecard brings clarity of purpose, organizational discipline and capacity, the means to measure, monitor and manage continuous improvement, and the ability to stay the course in driving the reform process onward to fidelity despite setbacks and changes.

Enablers: This involves the processes designed to get all stakeholders on board and moving in the same direction. Teachers and principals cannot follow the instructional framework or meet state or district standards if they are not clear on what those standards are. Constant communication among all stakeholders is vital to achieve mass collaboration in reaching the goals. Everyone has to know what the prize is and how you’re going to get there. Professional development must be targeted to the instructional framework and what is expected. Teachers need some latitude for creativity in exactly *how* they present their material, but there must be a core program and everyone should be in agreement on *what* needs to be taught and when. Exceptional performance should be recognized and a system should be in place to reward exceptional teachers and principals. At CMS we had a reward structure in place that included rewards for successful school teams -- not just individuals -- where everyone in the school shared in the reward. And school team members include custodians and cafeteria workers in addition to the principal, teachers and teacher aides. In this way, everyone at the school has “skin in the game,” and works to ensure the school is the best it can be.

Environmental Imperatives

The final set of imperatives are environmental -- both internal and external.

Internal: The core internal environmental imperative is to create, promote and maintain a culture of excellence. This imperative is especially difficult because, by definition, turnaround leaders are starting out in a culture of failure and despair. Within a culture of failure are so many elements that hinder the turnaround progress. Some individuals who find themselves in a turnaround situation will not understand why it must be done. They may be attached to traditional ways of doing things, assumptions and attitudes that have helped form the toxic culture of the failing school in the first place. And they may not be supportive of the changes needed to bring about the needed improvements. The board and the administration need to move beyond this quickly by articulating crystal clear goals for what students at every grade level should know and be able to do.

District leadership should also promote complete transparency and accountability. Everyone in the system should have a clear idea of why and how decisions have been made and what is expected.

Principals must have the authority to effect the personnel and policy changes they need to make in order to achieve a fast turnaround. In addition, both the board and the administration need to give the signal to all stakeholders that they have given the turnaround school principal the power to make these changes, even if they push the boundaries of what is considered correct at other schools.

Unions must be brought on board as respected partners and join in the effort to promote the welfare of the students over their own concerns. Unions are charged to focus on looking after their members' jobs and welfare, and that is appropriate, but if schools are forced to close down, union members lose along with the students, the community and everyone else. Unions must realize that a win for the school and the students is a win for everyone.

External: The external environmental factors involve forging partnerships with the community, parents, local officials, and the state and federal government officials who set and oversee standards. It is important to reach out to social services, recreation, law enforcement and other local entities to establish relationships and share knowledge.

Parents are among the important resources for any school system, and especially important for struggling schools. Engaging parents at every level is critical for success. Parents should be aware of what their children are asked "to know and do" in each subject area. Parent materials and other home communications should be designed so that parents are partners in the teaching and learning process.

At CMS we had a program called "Time, Talent, Treasures" that was designed to provide a framework for parents or other community members who wanted to be involved with the school system but didn't know how or what they had to offer. The idea was that we were happy to accept whatever people had to offer us so long as it was aligned with the instructional framework or the reform effort. If someone didn't have extra funds to donate (treasure) or a special ability (talent), they could donate time; come in and read to the kids or just help out with arts and crafts.

Parents can volunteer to read stories to children, conduct flash card drills, play games at recess, help children learn a foreign language, serve as tutors, office assistants and reading buddies. Presently, Mr. Griffin serves on the McClintock Partners In Education Board of Directors, an after-school tutorial program sponsored by a neighborhood Lutheran church. All of these volunteer efforts are aligned to the instructional program at the various school sites.

Successful School Turnaround - Why Do Most Turnarounds Fail?

Most turnaround efforts fail because of dysfunctional leadership, toxic cultures, and a “we vs. them” mindset that skews priorities by putting politics or career advancement ahead of student needs. Even in those circumstances where hearts are in the right place, turnaround efforts will fail if expectations for results are not clear and agreed upon before the work of the turnaround begins. Another common factor in turnaround failure is an over-dependence on school principal leadership alone when, in fact, school turnaround success is dependent upon effective leadership at all levels.

A lot of good plans go by the wayside, too, because people do not stop to consider the critical elements (“essential imperatives”) that go into a successful turnaround. Leadership knows what the principles are and articulates them, but can’t get stakeholders to internalize them. Collaboration, engagement and support fall short due to a lack of ownership on the part of key stakeholders, insufficient professional development, or because there are no proper incentives in place for reward and recognition.

This is generally known among consultants as the “knowing/doing gap.” People know what has to be done, but do not have the courage or capability to execute. In this case, sometimes bringing in outside help may be the answer.

McGraw-Hill Education’s Center for Comprehensive School Improvement

McGraw-Hill Education (MHE) recently announced the launch of its Center for Comprehensive School Improvement (CCSI). MHE has been informally consulting with school districts to accelerate student and teacher achievement for decades. Now the company is bringing together experts under the leadership of Mary Russick, CCSI vice president and executive director, and Arthur Griffin, Jr. to help drive district and school improvements with customized solutions that bring together all of MHE’s expertise in areas such as assessment and measurement, College and Career Readiness, professional development and research-based educational programs.

CCSI builds off of the company’s National Urban Advisory Resource Group, which was launched six years ago to work closely with large districts and help address their challenges.

CCSI solutions and services include:

- A broad and complete approach to instruction, curriculum and assessment, aimed at substantially improving student outcomes;
- Teacher effectiveness and leadership development designed to create high-performing schools;
- Formative assessment and predictive tools and services including CTB/McGraw-Hill’s Acuity, the market-leading formative assessment program;
- Capabilities that enhance individualized and personalized instruction, and
- Ongoing support and measurement.

Conclusion - “Are They Reading?”

Turning around an under-performing school or district is a major challenge. Even turnarounds in the private sector -- where executives have much greater latitude for taking strong, decisive action -- succeed only about 30 percent of the time.⁸

To have any chance of success, district leaders must give everyone in a leadership position permission to allow innovation and new ways of looking at student achievement, and must resist accepting the status quo.

Leadership has a responsibility to look past the numbers and ask hard questions.

When we were both in our early years at CMS, board member Arthur Griffin, Jr. would greet Deputy Superintendent Pughsley every morning at the elevator with the question: “Are they reading?”

“Every year we were getting our reading scores back from the State of North Carolina and they said we were making progress,” Arthur Griffin recalled. “Scores were going up. The only problem was that too many kids still weren’t reading at grade level. So after four or five changes in administrative leadership, I stopped asking about the strategies and the reading scores and just started asking Jim (Pughsley) every day, ‘Are they reading yet?’”

“I didn’t know Arthur too well then, but he was on the board and he kept asking me this,” noted Dr. Pughsley. “I figured he deserved an answer, so I started looking first hand at the data and processes. No, they were not reading. That was the short answer. And why weren’t they reading? I wanted to know. I kept digging, and eventually we came up with the instructional framework that would get them to level on reading -- and improve their math scores, too. That was the genesis of our turnaround.”

The funds from federal School Improvement Grants are now making their way to support the reform of America’s most challenged schools. These funds will make a difference as long as there are people at all leadership levels in the districts receiving those funds who are willing to put aside their own needs, put the students first; and work collaboratively toward the overriding goal of making sure that all students receive the education they need to compete and succeed in today’s global economy.

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Arthur Griffin, Jr., is currently senior vice president, Urban Advisory Resource, for McGraw-Hill Education. Prior to joining McGraw-Hill he served for 17 years on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Board of Education, including five years as chair (1997-2002). He also served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Council of the Great City Schools and chairman of

⁸ Beer, M. & Nohria, N., 2000, *Breaking the Code of Change*, Cambridge, MA; Harvard Business School Press.

its Professional Development Task Force; a member of the Steering Committee of the National Council of Urban Boards of Education; and a resident faculty member of the Broad Institute for School Board Members. In addition, he has been a regular guest lecturer at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. He is a Vietnam War veteran and a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army.

Dr. James L. Pughsley is the former Superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (2002-2005). He currently serves as a consultant to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in designing and developing the Accomplished Principal Certification program. He has served on the national commission on No Child Left Behind housed within the Aspen Institute. Dr. Pughsley also served as a member of a national task force on public education for the Center for American Progress and the Institute for America's Future. Additionally, he was Visiting Professor and Executive Director of the Darden-Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.