

# Look Back, Look Ahead

*To ensure a smooth transition  
in leadership, boards should  
take time to study where  
the district has been—and  
where it hopes to go*

**Ellen Foley, Robert Rothman, Judy  
Wurtzel, and Deanna Burney**

**L**ike many school districts, Boston in the 1980s and 1990s went through rapid transitions of leadership, and each new superintendent came in with a new idea, unrelated to what the district already had in place. As a result, the district lacked direction and made little improvement.

That pattern changed in 1995 when a newly appointed board took a close look at what the district needed in a superintendent and found one who had a long-term plan for improvement. When Thomas W. Payzant, who led the district for 11 years, retired as head of the 58,000-student Boston Public Schools, the last thing the board wanted was to return to policies of the past.

“We’re very clear with candidates: If you come in and tell us you want to reverse what we have, we’re not interested,” says Board President Elizabeth Reilinger, a long-time board member. “We’ve had candidates who say, ‘I think we should do this instead of that.’ That’s not appealing. They may be competent, but that’s not what we need.”

One way to avoid making the wrong choice is by commissioning what’s known as a transition case study—a timely and focused look at where the district has been in the past decade and where it hopes to be going.

While this kind of study takes time, it improves how boards and communities search for a new leader. In the past, boards may have spent weeks or months conducting interviews, making reference checks, and organizing site visits—all in an attempt to find the right superintendent. By starting with a case study that closely analyzes a district’s situation, the board can conduct a more focused search that, despite unforeseen roadblocks, results in a superintendent who better matches its needs.

## **The Boston experience**

Boston took advantage of the case study approach because Payzant announced his retirement well in

advance. This, he says, put him in “the unusual situation of announcing my retirement a year ahead of time and doing some things that may smooth the transition with whoever my successor is.”

Payzant asked the Aspen Institute, which operates a network of about a dozen superintendents from large urban districts, to analyze the district’s progress to date and the challenges that still lie ahead. Aspen teamed with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform to conduct the study.

Payzant and Reilinger say it was important that the study be conducted by outside experts.

“What Aspen and Annenberg did—bringing outside research and policy people with a national reputation to take an independent look at what is working and what needs to be changed—provides the kind of credibility that is important,” Payzant says.

The case study examined Payzant’s reform program, which was based on the idea that focusing on instruction, particularly in literacy and

mathematics, would improve learning for all students. The case study also looked at the extent of instructional improvement a decade later, and took stock of the district’s efforts to improve the capacity of teachers, principals, and the central office in support of continuous improvement.

Because Boston had a consistent 10-year reform effort, the project’s goal was not just to support transition in leadership. We also wanted to assist in the transition in reforms—so that new leadership did not lead to the knee-jerk policy churn so common in urban districts. The Annenberg/Aspen team worked closely with the district and its partners, examining a wealth of documents and data, and conducting interviews and focus groups with nearly 100 students, educators, central office administrators, and community leaders.

The core questions were: What has been accomplished? What have been the challenges to improvement? What should be preserved? What should be reworked or abandoned? The team heard a remarkably consistent set of responses (see sidebar on left).

## Benefits of a case study approach

Boston’s public schools planned thoughtfully for administrative change by taking a number of steps to review the district’s accomplishments and challenges. As part of that review, the district commissioned an external examination—a transition case study. Such a study can take an in-depth look at a district’s reform effort, present the views of many groups, and identify future strategies for both the community and the new administration to consider.

Transition case studies should be focused, timely, independent, collaborative, and public. Let’s look at each attribute:

**Focused:** Transition case studies define a clear time frame to be examined and articulate a specific focus for research. The time frame might look back over the outgoing superintendent’s tenure or begin with the implementation of a major reform initiative. In either case, it should continue through to the most recent developments in the district’s history. Additionally, the research’s focus must be defined from the outset and informed by an initial review of district documents describing key reform efforts. One case study might focus on efforts to build instructional capacity; others might emphasize systemwide efforts around accountability or curriculum. While interviews and documents undoubtedly raise other issues, the study focus must drive the research and analysis of the data.

**Timely:** Transition case studies ideally are completed prior to the existing superintendent’s departure. This, of course, is only possible when the superintendent announces the departure long in advance. With such lead time, however, transition case studies can help identify characteristics and skills needed in a new superintendent as well as engage community partners.

**Independent:** For maximum credibility, the studies should be conducted by independent re-

viewers who have little or no direct connection to the system. District employees, community members, and others involved in the study are more likely to be candid with independent reviewers. All those interviewed are given confidentiality so they can be honest in their comments to reviewers.

**Collaborative:** While case study researchers come from outside the system, they must draw on the expertise of district employees, stakeholders, and community members. Ideally, a small panel of key system leaders and partners will serve as an advisory group. They help the external team gather important documents, identify a focus and a set of people to be interviewed, and review and comment on draft versions of the case study.

**Public:** Once the transition case study has been finalized, it does not sit on a shelf. Rather it is shared with key groups throughout the city, particularly the school board, the superintendent selection committee, and community groups. Ideally, the external review team plays a part in facilitating discussions with such groups to help them think through their role in the next phase of reform. Additionally, local media outlets are apprised of the transition case study and are likely to use it as source material for daily stories and editorials.

A transition case study can also serve as an introductory guidebook to the system, not unlike the kind of guide a tourist might read before visiting a foreign country. It provides an overview of key events in the system’s history, a discussion of governance, translations of common terminology, and “maps” that can help the newcomer traverse the often intricate labyrinths of district operations. To fully understand the system’s language, culture, and mores, a new superintendent must be immersed in it, but a transition case study can provide the kind of information that will help her avoid offending the natives.

The study and other reviews of the district's needs convinced the city that Boston has "an incredibly strong foundation for district-wide reform," says Reilinger. Nonetheless, the review also showed the need to accelerate improvements, close achievement gaps, and engage the community around teaching and learning agendas.

"Those are the criteria that drove us as we interviewed candidates," Reilinger says.

### A new search model

The case study helps a board and a community take three steps *before* looking for a new leader: take stock, listen to the community, and use data to identify strengths and needs. These steps take time, but the time is worth it to ensure a stronger fit between the leader and the district.

■ **Take stock.** The Boston study identified the progress the district had made and the challenges that remained. It found, for example, that the district had a fairly strong instructional program, but problems remained with coherence and alignment across grades and subject areas. The study also found a lack of progress in redesigning the central office and engaging some segments of the community.

Other districts might find strong instructional leadership but have gaps in assessment and accountability. Or they might find that the teaching staff is less well qualified than necessary. These findings, which might be surprising, can help you frame the task of searching for a successor. They begin to establish the skill set that the new leader must have.

■ **Listen to your community.** The Boston study included interviews and focus groups with a broad range of people—educators, administrators, parents, and community leaders. These interviews unearthed some surprising perceptions about the district. For example, school leaders who may have felt they reached out to a broad constituency learned that some community leaders felt they were not included in the decision-making process.

Other schools and districts have gained insight by reaching out to students. Recently, a committee searching for a middle school principal in West Chester, Pa., invited students to question the two final candidates. The students' thoughtful questions and subsequent anonymous written evaluations showed how well they understood their school, what made it work well, and what it needed. The students provided insightful information to the search committee, which had not really considered the student viewpoint before.

A committee that sponsors these school/community conversations will hear valuable information that will add to the search framework. Moreover, it's possible that observations from diverse communities will yield a fairly common theme, at once reinforcing strengths and identifying needs.

■ **Use data to identify strengths and needs.** Boston's student data system is fairly sophisticated, and much information about student achievement is well known. But the case study highlighted the gap in achievement between students in regular and special education, and underscored the uneven quality of instruction throughout the district. Districts also may want to know how teachers are using the data they have and whether they need more training

Based on the answers to these and other questions, a clearer sense of the district's strengths and needs emerged, adding further to the understanding of the skill set a new leader should bring.

### Making a match

After spending time taking stock, listening to the community, and defining strengths and needs, a board should have a clearer sense of the kind of leader it seeks. Now the challenge lies in finding the person with the skills to build on those strengths and address unmet needs.

To be sure, a candidate's personality and management style are important considerations. But by taking the time to analyze the district and the community, the board is more likely to look beyond these qualities and continue the reform in the right direction.

Boston is fortunate that it had the stable leadership of the same superintendent and mayor for 10 years, a steady reform agenda, and a transition process. That's not to say there haven't been hurdles.

The district's first choice, Manuel J. Rivera, superintendent of the Rochester, N.Y., school system, accepted the job and then decided in late January to accept a position as the top adviser to New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer. The district has an interim superintendent, Michael Contompasis, who is a 40-year education veteran. Contompasis has agreed to remain in the position until a replacement is found.

Despite the setback, Reilinger and others are convinced that the kind of review the district undertook will ultimately result in success. And they say this review can be carried out just as well by other districts—including those with less of a record of success and political agreement—as long as the board sticks to its proper role as a policymaking body, rather than an operational one.

"Can it be done in any district? Yes," Reilinger says. "But you have to have a board that plays a policy and leadership role, rather than one that micromanages." ■

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Ellen Foley (ellen\_foley@brown.edu) is a principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in Providence, R.I. Robert Rothman (robert\_rothman@brown.edu) is editor of *Voices in Urban Education* at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Judy Wurtzel (judy.wurtzel@aspeninst.org) is a senior fellow at the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C. Deanna Burney (deanna\_burney@post.harvard.edu) is an independent education consultant.