



How Cities Can Act to Close the Achievement Gap

A roadmap for comprehensive, collaborative, and citywide approaches to education reform

By Bari Walsh

If you're a school or city leader in almost any municipality in America, you're confronting entrenched achievement gaps that consign lower-income, English learning, or minority students to poorer outcomes. Your city has any number of programs to support families, and any number of initiatives to support students. But the gaps remain.

Over the last two years, six cities from across the country have participated in an experiment to find out what it really takes to close those gaps — an experiment based on the recognition that schools alone can't do it. Leaders from these six cities have reorganized and aligned their municipal structures to address the multifaceted challenges that cement the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement.

In a report that takes stock of what they've learned, the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is sharing some of the key lessons for a successful citywide campaign to prioritize educational equity. As the report cautions, the work is not easy, not always orderly, and not of short duration. But there are broad takeaways that can help other cities launch a similar community effort.

All Children, By All Means

The six cities who've joined the experiment — Louisville, Kentucky; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; and Salem, Somerville, and Newton in Massachusetts —

comprise the first cohort of a consortium called By All Means, which provided the framing philosophy and guidance, city-specific consulting help, and a broad professional community for reflection and collaboration beyond city lines.

Each of the six cities explored equity gaps in distinct and context-specific ways, making changes — some more successful than others, some just beginning to bear fruit, some that will need a generation to assess — and building connections among city agencies, the school districts, nonprofits, and residents. Among the issues they tackled: access to preschool and to college, improving behavioral health services, expanding access to personalized learning, and creating universal summer and afterschool programming. Here are the lessons that have emerged thus far.

Whole-City Education Reform: Key Lessons

Mayoral Leadership is Critical

To fuel a collaborative, citywide education effort, cities need the political clout that comes from mayoral involvement, the report concludes. Each By All Means city launched or revitalized a “children's cabinet” to spearhead its initiatives, and cabinet members pointed to the mayors as being the most crucial factor in their success — signaling the work's priority and bringing senior executives to the table.

Children’s Cabinets Need Real Authority

“Setting up a children’s cabinet and calling it to meet is — with mayoral leadership — relatively straightforward,” the report states. “Creating a cabinet with the right members and a clear plan that enables cross-agency work is much harder.” Each city in the By All Means consortium formed a cabinet that was chaired by the mayor, co-chaired by the superintendent or another city leader, and included representation from health and social services and other government and community organizations.

Running an Effective Children’s Cabinet:

- Make sure cabinets consist of decision-makers and executives who are representative of the community — and have authority to act.
- Meet regularly (monthly or bi-monthly).
- Collectively establish a common vision for, and understanding of, the work.
- Articulate structures and processes to streamline complex efforts.
- Create action-oriented agendas to make cross-agency decisions, share progress, plan next steps.
- Carry the work forward between meetings via working groups or small teams.

From the Start, Focus on Creating Internal Capacity

Since the children’s cabinets relied heavily on executive leadership, cities found that it was key to identify at least one supporting staff member (or members, ideally from different sectors) to be deeply embedded in the day-to-day work and maintain momentum.

- Decide who will be responsible for moving the work forward, and decide how much time they will need.
- Free up that staff time, or identify funding to hire staff.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities.

Turnover Happens. Plan to Sustain the Momentum.

To avoid serious setbacks during the inevitable transitions, cabinets should cultivate resilience and nurture the durability of their work. Keep the following broad guidelines in mind:

- Cabinets should work to identify and articulate a shared vision for children prior to any major changes in the superintendent’s office.
- They should develop tangible plans to carry out the work.

- Cabinets should ensure and demonstrate the continued support of the mayor.
- When a transition occurs, bring incoming or acting leaders into the process as early as possible.
- Work consistently to strengthen cross-agency relationships.
- Make it a priority to build community support and demand for this work, from the beginning.

Build Strong City-School Relationships

For By All Means cities, the most important relationship — and the primary predictor of progress — was between mayors and superintendents. Other partnerships (between schools and other child service providers, or between city offices and nonprofits) were also important.

Funding Challenges Are Ongoing

Cities need to address funding challenges — at startup and beyond — in a forthright way, as a key part of their planning. The experiences of the six cities in By All Means yielded several top-level strategies for funding success, starting with pursuing a multi-pronged approach that leverages mayoral leadership.

Define, Communicate, and Build Community Demand

As the project gets started, cities should clearly define the problem they are seeking to tackle and give their constituencies convincing evidence of its local urgency. Community buy-in is key to sustaining any kind of large-scale reform project, so leaders should be mindful about building demand for their work through a campaign of clear and continual public communication. The messaging should convey a sense of welcome, making clear that this new and comprehensive approach to serving children will engage the whole community, including parents, taxpayers, and voters — and that all voices will be heard.

Funding Challenges — Keys to Success

- Follow a multi-pronged plan that includes private and public funding and short and long-term strategies.
- Leverage the mayor’s leadership to identify and secure external resources, create new revenue streams, and develop long-term funding strategies.
- Reallocate existing funding to match spending with city priorities.
- Develop new ways to share funding across agencies to address common goals.
- Access all available state and federal funding opportunities.