

Left to Chance: Student Outcomes in Seattle Public Schools

A forensic history
1990-2024



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Southeast Seattle
Education Coalition

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Foreword

Understanding the Path to Educational Transformation

To understand why we can be optimistic about the future of public education, we must first recognize how our understanding of educational improvement has evolved over the past several decades. The journey of Seattle Public Schools, like that of many urban districts, reveals a progression in our collective knowledge about creating effective educational systems that serve all students well.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, many districts embraced market-based reforms, believing that competition and autonomy would naturally drive improvement. These are the years my two oldest children entered the Seattle Public School system. The theory was straightforward: if schools had to compete for students, they would innovate and improve to attract families. This led to experiments with school-based management, open enrollment, and other reforms designed to create market-like conditions in public education.

What we learned from these experiments was invaluable, though not in the way reformers initially expected. While autonomy and choice did create pockets of innovation, they also led to fragmentation and inconsistency that particularly disadvantaged students with the greatest needs. This taught us that improvement requires more than just freeing schools from central control – it requires carefully designed systems that balance autonomy with coherence.

The next wave of reform emphasized standardization and accountability, swinging the pendulum toward central control. Districts implemented common standards, assessments, and improvement metrics. While this created more consistency, we learned that top-down mandates alone couldn't create the conditions for sustained improvement. Communities felt left out and parents in particular. What worked in one context didn't automatically translate to another, and educator buy-in proved essential for any meaningful change.

Today, we can be optimistic because we understand that effective educational systems need both strong central vision and local innovation – not as competing forces, but as complementary strengths. We now know that improvement requires:

1. Clear system-wide goals and expectations that ensure all students have access to high-quality learning opportunities
2. Robust support systems that help schools implement effective practices while adapting them to local needs
3. Meaningful collaboration between central office and schools, rather than pure autonomy or pure control
4. Deep engagement with families and communities as essential partners in education
5. Sustained focus on equity as fundamental to educational excellence

This more sophisticated understanding positions us to make progress in ways that weren't possible before. We think we can see how to create systems that provide consistent quality while still honoring the unique needs of different school communities.

Equally important is our growing recognition that equity isn't separate from educational excellence – it is educational excellence. When we design systems to support success for students furthest from educational justice, we create better conditions for all students to thrive. This understanding helps align various key players around common goals in ways that were previously difficult to achieve.

We also better understand the role of each part of the educational system. School boards can focus on setting clear policy direction while giving superintendents operational flexibility. Central offices can provide coordination and support while respecting schools' need to adapt to their specific contexts. Schools can innovate within coherent frameworks rather than operating in isolation. The leadership bar is high but not out of reach.

Technology now offers new tools for personalizing learning while maintaining high standards for all students. Professional learning networks allow educators to share effective practices across schools and districts. Data systems help us understand what's working and what isn't, enabling more targeted and effective support.

None of this means the path forward will be easy. The latest barrier is the shift in the political atmosphere. Creating effective educational systems requires sustained commitment, careful attention to implementation, and willingness to learn from both successes and setbacks. Will the pendulum swing too far in the other direction again? We now have the knowledge and tools to make meaningful progress in ways that weren't possible in previous reform eras. Will we?

Most importantly, we have countless dedicated educators, administrators, families, and community members who remain deeply committed to public education's transformative potential. Their continued engagement, combined with our improved understanding of how to create effective educational systems, provides genuine cause for optimism about education's future.

The work of educational improvement is never truly finished – societies and students need change and transition. They will continue to evolve, requiring constant adaptation. However, we now have the foundational knowledge needed to create systems that can evolve while maintaining focus on the student. With sustained commitment and application of these hard-won insights, we can work together to build educational systems truly capable of serving all students well.



Ruby Love, CEO at Love Resource Development Group

Executive Summary

In 1990, Seattle Public Schools was a district in deep crisis. According to an audit commissioned by the State Legislature, SPS faced “urgent and fundamental problems,” including ineffective central management of schools, precarious finances, low employee morale, dwindling public confidence, and racial disproportionality in student outcomes. Auditors attributed the crisis to multiple factors, the most significant of which was “the failure of the school board and the superintendent to provide strong, consistent leadership.”

The situation within SPS echoed a larger national crisis in education. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* - a hugely influential Federal report on American public K-12 education - described a system everywhere hobbled by centralized bureaucracy and unable to meet the needs of students and the economy. According to the emerging neoliberal consensus of the 1980s and 1990s, the solution lay in decentralizing bureaucracies to unleash the creativity of educators and administrators and in subjecting individual schools to competitive market pressures through increased consumer choice.

By 1995, SPS had committed to decentralization as the answer to its “urgent and fundamental problems.” That year, the School Board hired retired Major General John H. Stanford as Superintendent with a mandate to implement this radical reform. Stanford, a strikingly charismatic individual, during his brief tenure laid the groundwork for a decentralized, “market-based” system of schools, most notably through his negotiation of a groundbreaking collective bargaining agreement with the Seattle Education Association (SEA).

However, his sudden illness and untimely death in 1998, and the subsequent departure of SEA’s Executive Director, who had been his partner in reform, prevented the full implementation of his vision. Under his successor, Joseph Olchefske, who had come to the District from a career in investment banking, the District did decentralize, rapidly and extensively. However, Stanford’s vision of a full organizational restructuring in the context of a trust-based union-management relationship never materialized. As a result, roles and responsibilities at every level of the organization remained undefined, and therefore subject to continual negotiation and renegotiation systemwide.

The resulting confusion would be described as “100 plus separate school systems” - severely siloed school sites only loosely tethered to the central office and to one another. By 2003, this mass untethering of schools (and even of departments within the central office) had led to dire consequences for the organization. The immediate outcome of decentralization reform was a District faced with a large and unexpected budget shortfall, administrators and educators struggling to obtain consistent central support, and students experiencing severely inequitable opportunities and outcomes.

The following decade saw successive Superintendents attempt to reintegrate the District's "100 plus separate school systems" into one coherent system. Superintendent Raj Manhas (2003-2007) succeeded in brokering a new Partnership Agreement with the Seattle Education Association in a subset of schools and led the development of the District's first strategic plan, focused on both financial sustainability and equitable access to educational opportunity. Ultimately, however, his efforts were largely stymied by an adversarial School Board and by the very institutional incoherence he was attempting to address.

By 2007, there was overwhelming evidence that the decade-long experiment with site-based management and market-based schools had led to fragmentation, inequity, and poor student outcomes. In response, Manhas's successor, Dr. Maria Goodloe-Johnson, oversaw the development of a new Strategic Plan that sought to build organizational coherence through robust oversight and accountability mechanisms. Her tenure was riven by conflict with the union, community, and School Board. Ultimately, despite her strong focus on student success, her leadership style and her identification with the increasingly unpopular national education reform movement ultimately led to her firing.

In the years that followed, Superintendents have largely abandoned further central efforts to reintegrate the District's schools, focusing instead on encouraging schools to adopt best practices and pursue common goals. In this way, the District has made progress towards educational equity and quality goals, but challenges remain. A persistent culture of school-level autonomy and a lingering market orientation towards education hinder sustainable progress toward implementing equity-focused policies and initiatives. Addressing these issues will require a collective effort to comprehensively reevaluate the organization's management structure, governance model, and prioritization of site-level choice over district-wide quality.

Now, 30 years after the School Board's bold hiring of John H. Stanford, we must critically assess the long-term impacts of his reforms. To that end, this report recommends:

1. The District and stakeholders collaboratively reassess the school-based management model and its implementation in SPS, and consider how to mitigate its negative effects while retaining its strengths. School-based management was a relatively novel and experimental concept when it was introduced into Seattle Public Schools in the 1990s. However, subsequent research has suggested mixed results for the concept in terms of improved outcomes for students, at least when implemented as a stand-alone reform.

In addition, because of Stanford's untimely death, school-based management itself was never fully implemented, with catastrophic results for cross-institutional stability and consistency. The persistence of site-level independence without a clear organizational structure continues to dramatically curtail management's ability to effectively and sustainably implement evidence-based solutions across the organization.

SPS and its stakeholders - including management, unions, families, students and the broader Seattle community - should review the large body of evidence that has been created since 1995 regarding the effectiveness of school-based management, as well as the recent literature on promising organizational structures that do support improved student outcomes. All stakeholders should then collaboratively determine whether the benefits of the existing paradigm justify its continued use as an organizing principle, or whether it would be more beneficial for students if it were replaced with a different approach.

2. Seattle Public Schools and its stakeholders work together to create, implement and continually improve an effective accountability structure that strengthens reciprocal relationships at every level of the organization.

Under Stanford's decentralization reforms, accountability would occur through market-style competition between schools for "customers." Stanford's accountability system was never fully implemented, and the elements that were put in place were ultimately reversed. However, they created a lasting culture in which families are positioned as the ultimate guarantors of school quality through their exercise of consumer choice and consumer pressure. Despite their loss of market leverage, families are still expected to individually raise and resolve issues directly with school management; there continues to be no mechanism for effective central administrative oversight and continuous improvement of schools.

The persistent absence of such a mechanism drives families whose issues cannot be resolved locally to appeal to the only accessible element of the system: the School Board. However, the School Board is not empowered to intervene in the system and force resolution in individual cases. For decades, elected officials have been incentivized to prioritize the interests of specific individuals and groups over the educational needs of the broader Seattle community. This has displaced the School Board's proper role in setting strong policy direction to the Superintendent to align District operations to community values around educational quality, and closely and transparently monitoring the results.

SPS must finally attend to the reform of governance that has been urged repeatedly for the past 35 years. This will require the School Board and the Office of the Superintendent to fully commit to improving governance in authentic collaboration with the community they serve. It will also require extensive internal work by SPS educators, administrators and associated stakeholders to replace the defunct market-based model of accountability with a new and effective paradigm that finally delivers on the District's critical responsibilities to students and families.

We note that the City of Seattle, King County and the State of Washington have all made critical investments in the success of Seattle Public Schools. Now, as in the past, they may have a role to play in supporting the District to look inward, outward and ahead to a better future. We urge all stakeholders to contribute to this pressing and important work - anything less will continue to ***leave student outcomes to chance.***

Introduction

Every system is perfectly designed to get the results that it does.

W. Edwards Deming

In 1997, Seattle Public Schools embarked on an experiment in structural reform that persists to this day. Known as “school-based management,” this approach to reform sprang from the same rising neoliberal impetus toward the infusion of market principles into public services that drove the rise of contemporaneous concepts such as school vouchers and charter schools. Seattle was an early adopter of what became an internationally popular concept, in an attempt to address severe organizational challenges and widespread community discontent with the quality of local public education. However, as this report outlines, these organizational challenges persisted and even worsened after the introduction of the school-based management model, with the negative effects falling hardest on students of color furthest from educational justice.

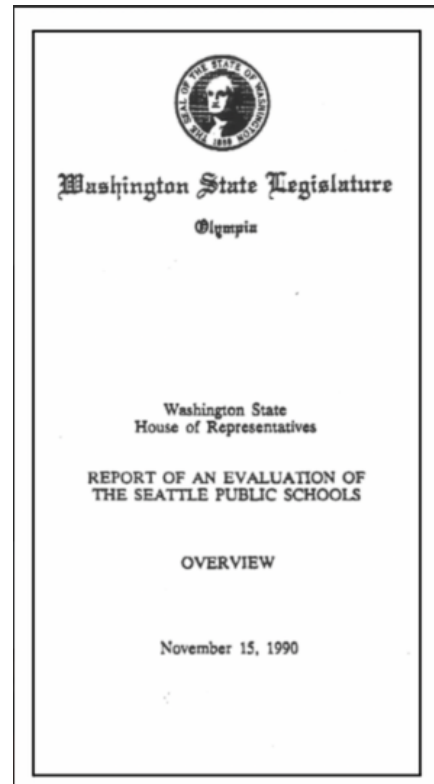
The past two decades have been marked by successive efforts to address both the initial organizational weaknesses and the effects of the District’s implementation of school-based management in response. As this report will show, despite sincere efforts by capable personnel at all levels, and the existence of an exceptional reservoir of local community support for public education, the incentives for various stakeholders built into Seattle’s system of school-based management have continually circumvented the possibility of durable improvement. This report reviews both the crises created by the introduction of school-based management into Seattle Public Schools, and subsequent efforts to place the organization on a sustainable footing. It closes with a recognition that sustained effort is still needed to ensure that the District can deliver excellent education to all students, and recommendations to this end for all stakeholders drawn from the implications of their common history.

I. “The Seattle Public Schools have reached a crossroads,” 1990-1995

In 1990, an audit of Seattle Public Schools performed at the request of the Washington State Legislature found a district in crisis due to its lack of a “consistent focus [on] what is in the best interest of all the children in Seattle.” (1) Auditors located the primary responsibility for this state of affairs in the School Board. Rather than maintaining the school system’s focus on students by providing consistent policy guidance to the management (the Superintendent), the Board instead often itself “function[ed] in a management role, undermining the Superintendent’s ability to do so.” (2) At the same time, rather than providing unified direction on behalf of the entire community, the School Board functioned “essentially as a group of individual decision-makers [...] reacting to and responding to the wishes of individual constituencies.” (3)

As a result, it had effectively become “impossible for staff to set priorities and manage their areas of responsibility in an orderly and rational way,”(4) and this had led to a system near collapse. Schools were “under-managed and under-supported,” (5) program offerings

were fragmented, “the organizational structure lack[ed] focus,” and “long-range planning and budgeting efforts [were] neglected.” Racial disproportionality in academic outcomes “continue[d] to be a problem, even though the District ha[d] made reduction of disproportionality one of its primary objectives.” (6) Because the Board had focused on management rather than governance, “structures to hold the District accountable for its performance and to provide feedback on success [were] virtually nonexistent.” (7) The Seattle Public Schools, auditors declared, “have reached a crossroads.”



The title page of the SPS audit by Cresap Consulting

1 Report of an Evaluation of the Seattle Public Schools, Cresap Consulting, November 15, 1990, III-3

2 Id, at III-3

3 Id, at III-5

4 Id.

5 Id, at I-9

6 Id, at 2

7 Id, at I-6

The audit concluded that “governance is the central problem to be addressed if the District is to function effectively,”⁽⁸⁾ and urged the Board to attend to policymaking in support of identified goals for student achievement, and to undertake regular progress monitoring. Auditors suggested that if the Board made no progress toward representing the entire community rather than individual interest groups, and in implementing effective governance, the Legislature should consider switching to a system of electing Board members at large (citywide, rather than by “district”), or having the Governor appoint them directly. ⁽⁹⁾

While the audit report gained significant publicity, little progress was made in the years that followed in implementing its recommendations. After the passage of several years in which the District continued to languish, ⁽¹⁰⁾ a group of influential local business leaders worked successfully to get change-oriented community members elected in their stead. ⁽¹¹⁾ The new Board members included Donald P. Nielsen, a successful local businessman and Harvard MBA who brought a strong business orientation to his work as a director. Nielsen “convinced his colleagues that the only way to develop great schools was to find a great leader”. ⁽¹²⁾



John Stanford, Courtesy: SPS

In 1995, after a national search, the School Board found that leader in Major General John H. Stanford. ⁽¹³⁾ An African American combat veteran and former executive assistant to the Secretary of Defense, the immensely charismatic Stanford was the hiring choice of the School Board precisely because he was not an educator. Director Nielsen asserted the logic behind this choice: “if you want to transform an institution that has been stagnant for decades, the last place you look for a leader is inside that institution.” ⁽¹⁴⁾

8 Id at, III-1

9 Id, at III-12

10 “Seattle School Leaders Still Lack Clear Vision,” The Seattle Times, March 28, 1993

11 Mindy Cameron, *Tradition to Transformation: How Seattle is Reinventing its Public Schools*, (2003) at 28; “Group Wants Attention Focused On Schools - “Step Forward” Meeting Emphasizes Election,” The Seattle Times, May 14, 1991

12 “Donald P. Nielsen, MBA 1963: 2004 Alumni Achievement Award Recipient,” Harvard Business School Stories, January 1, 2004

13 “The Stanford era begins - Seattle’s new schools superintendent joins a district primed for change,” The Seattle Times, July 30, 1995

14 Linda S. Sparks, *The Political Ecology of a School Board Decision to Hire a Nontraditional Superintendent*, doctoral dissertation (2005)

II. “A system of market-based schools,” 1995-1998

Indeed, Stanford described himself as “bring[ing] a business leadership approach to solving educational problems.” (15) His stance reflected the rising popularity at the time of neoliberalism, a political theory that supported the deregulation of markets and the extension of market-style management principles into public sector institutions. To Stanford, as to the new business-minded members of the School Board, the problem of public education was the problem of centralized bureaucracy: “Schools were accustomed to operating as if they were part of a command economy, like the one in the former Soviet Union: Money and students were allocated by central administration; the survival of individual schools was guaranteed, regardless of customer satisfaction; and customers had to accept the product whether they liked it or not.” (16)

Stanford’s answer to the intransigence of educational bureaucracy would be a radical shift to a competitive “market-based system of schools” (17) led by CEO-style principals, (18) which hired their own staff, designed their own structure and offerings, and managed their own budgets directly in order to be responsive to their “customers,” who would be free to choose any school in the system. (19) His goal was to “creat[e] a system in which individual schools would survive or fail based on their ability to provide what the market wanted.” (20)

This approach built on a relatively novel approach to educational administration that was at that time growing in popularity across the globe: that of “school-based management.” This concept aligned with the general drive at the time to apply private sector management efficiency principles, such as administration decentralization to “unleash” worker innovation, to public sector organizations. School-based management combined modern business management theory with education research showing that “individual schools appear to be the largest educational units in which meaningful change can be brought about” and that “school principals are the key agents for affecting change in a school”. (21)

The concept had grown out of the modern education reform movement that had its inception in the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, the immensely influential (and controversial) report of an expert committee assembled by Ronald Reagan’s first education secretary, Terrell H. Bell. (22) Famously claiming that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational

15 “John Henry Stanford, Retired Army General, Named Seattle Superintendent of Schools,” *Jet Magazine*, August 28, 1995, at 23

16 Major General John H. Stanford, *Victory In Our Schools: We CAN Give Our Children Excellent Public Education*, 1999, at 152

17 *Id.*, at 155

18 *Id.*, at 164

19 *Id.*, at 154

20 *Id.*, at 162

21 Washington Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Report to the Legislature the School Based Management Program (Chapter 42, Laws of 1985)*, January 1988

22 National Commission on Excellence in Education, “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Nov., 1983), at 112-130

performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war,” *A Nation at Risk* urged transformational change in American K-12 schooling to increase the nation’s economic competitiveness and the fitness of its citizens to maintain democracy.

This included the creation of rigorous academic performance standards for all American public school students. In 1986, the Carnegie Corporation-sponsored Task Force on Teaching as a Profession advised “professionalizing” teaching to better support standards-based education. Since the hallmark of professionalism lay in the self-directed exercise of expert judgment and horizontal collaboration, this in turn, would require a reduction in centralized bureaucracy to shift decision-making authority to the educator and school level - in other words, “school-based management.” (23)

Accordingly, Stanford concentrated the bulk of his attention on “decentralizing control and truly making principals executives.” (24) Principals would receive “CEO training” and be provided power over staffing, budgets, and curriculum. In collaboration with a team of building staff, they would create and administer a plan for improving outcomes tailored to their specific student body. They would also be directly accountable for the results, with student test scores comprising some 50% of a principal’s annual rating. (25)

However, the primary mechanism for accountability in Stanford’s market-based district would be competition between schools. One of the new Superintendent’s earliest moves was to upend the District’s “controlled choice” process for assigning students to schools for the purpose of racial balance. It was replaced with a district-wide open school choice system in which students could choose to attend any school in the District (although transportation would only be available to certain schools within a “cluster”). (26) If families were dissatisfied with their school, they were now theoretically free to move their student to one that was more attractive.

The open choice plan could not create competition, however, unless it carried consequences for schools that suffered the judgment of the “market” via lost enrollment. Thus, Stanford and his Chief Financial Officer, Joseph Olchefske, a former investment banker who shared Stanford’s commitment to the application of “market theory and general management principles” (27) to education, also explored ways to condition school funding on market success.

They hit upon the idea of providing schools with funds that attached to students rather than to staff, as had traditionally been the case. (28) This meant that if a family removed their child from a school and sent them elsewhere in the District, there would be a transfer of funds between the schools - essentially an “in-district voucher program.” (29) These funds now functioned like cash, so that whereas previously only around 2% of district funds had been under direct school control, this would now expand to just over one third, with a plan to eventually place almost all District funds under direct school control. (30)

23 Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, 1986

24 Stanford, id, at 162

25 Id, at 64

26“Seattle schools ok new assigning plan,” *The Seattle Times*, November 6, 1997

27 Stig Leschly, “Transformation of Seattle Public Schools 1995–2002,” *Harvard Business School Case Note No. N9-802-197*, April 15, 2002

28 Stanford, id, at 186

29 Stig Leschly, id (2002), at 6

30 Bruce S. Cooper, Timothy R. DeRoche, William G. Ouchi, Lydia G. Segal and Carolyn Brown, “Weighted Student Formula: Putting Funds Where They Count in Education Reform,” *Education Working Paper Archive*, June 5, 2006

Critics pointed out that the end of large-scale cross-district busing meant that schools would inevitably resegregate due to Seattle's underlying racially segregated housing patterns, and that this would lead to the concentration of "high-need" students in south Seattle schools. Olchefske's solution took inspiration from the Canadian public school district of Edmonton, Alberta, which had pioneered the concept of a "weighted student formula," in which resources were allocated to schools on the basis of certain characteristics of enrolled students. (31)

Olchefske designed a formula for Seattle in which schools received a base allocation of funds for each enrolled student, plus additional "weighted" amounts for each student with disabilities, learning English, eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, or with test scores in the lowest three deciles. (32) The intent (if not the actual practice) (33) was to drive more funding to schools newly serving larger proportions of students with more complex educational needs.

However, small schools were to be temporarily exempted from the judgment of the market. These schools could not generate enough funding to operate via a purely student-linked allocation. Therefore, in response to principal concerns, the formula initially included an additional "foundation allocation" for basic operations, calculated on a per-school rather than a per-student basis. (34) As this added considerable expense to the District's budget, the formula delineated minimum viable school sizes, and included a plan to close schools that had not met the enrollment threshold by the start of the 1999-2000 school year. (35)

The final obstacle to creating a market-based system of schools was the hiring process for educators. Under the existing Collective Bargaining Agreement with the Seattle Education Association (the educators' union), principals and school staff had no official role in the hiring system. Hiring was carried out by central administration and applicants were placed in open positions in order of seniority. (36) Principals were thus often incentivized to conceal vacancies until the spring, when the union contract permitted them to hire externally. (37)

Stanford saw this and other provisions of the union contract as part of the "command economy" style of public school administration that he was attempting to uproot. He felt that there would need to be "a wholly new contract in order to create the child-focused district we were envisioning." (38) The contract was set to expire at the end of his first year in office, and Stanford was determined to press for change: "There was no way I wanted to renegotiate that contract. I wanted to burn it all and start over!" (39)

31 Stanford, id, at 186; "Accounting for change - schools like the results when they are given more control of budgets," *The Seattle Times*, May 19, 1998

32 Seattle Public Schools, *Weighted Student Formula: Budget Allocations to Schools for the 1997-98 School Year*, March 3, 1997

33 Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell & James Harvey, *It Takes a City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform* (2000), at 42

34 "Small-school compromise softens blow," *The Seattle Times*, January 24, 1997

35 Seattle Public Schools, *Seattle School District Resource Allocation Plan*, June 24, 1996

36 *Collective Bargaining Agreement between Seattle School District No. 1 and SEA Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees*, 1993 - 1996, Article IX, Section G

37 Leschly, id at 6

38 Stanford, id, at 138

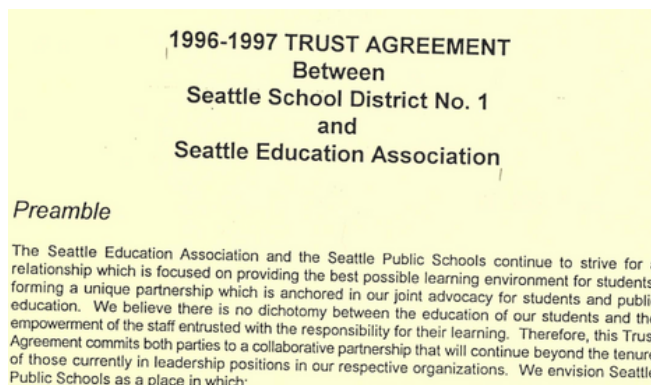
39 Id.

Perhaps surprisingly, Stanford had a willing partner in SEA Executive Director Roger Erskine, who had come to Seattle from National Education Association (NEA) headquarters in Washington, D.C. At that time, the NEA was attempting to craft an effective response to the growing neoliberal drive to embed market logic into public education. (40)

NEA President Bob Chase warned the organization's members that “we must revitalize our public schools from within or they will be dismantled from without.” (41) Chase sought to recast the NEA from an industrial to a professional union model that would shift its traditional adversarial stance to one of “collaborating actively with management on an agenda of school reform.” (42)

Erskine had been closely involved in this work, even serving on the board of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a philanthropy-funded initiative aimed at implementing school-based management and related reforms in districts across the country. (43) He now proposed that union and district collaborate on a non-binding agreement similar to the groundbreaking pact between the United Automobile Workers and General Motors at its Saturn plant in Tennessee. (44) The 1985 GM-UAW “Trust Agreement” had replaced a famously detailed and restrictive 600-page contract with a 30-page commitment to labor-management collaboration and to the resolution of grievances through mediation. (45)

Erskine and Stanford used this model for the 8-page SEA-SPS Trust Agreement of 1996, which went into effect at the beginning of the 1996-7 school year. (46) The Trust Agreement committed the parties to developing a “trust-based relationship” based on the mutual understanding that there is “no dichotomy between the education of our students and the empowerment of the staff entrusted with the responsibility for their learning.”



The Agreement foresaw shared accountability for student achievement among “students, parents, teachers, support staff, administrators, and community” and an “authentic role” for staff “in decisions which affect instruction and the delivery of educational programs.”

40 Adam Urbanski, “Revolution of Rising Expectations,” *Education Week*, March 1, 1995

41 Bob Chase, “The New NEA: Reinventing Teacher Unions for a New Era,” *American Educator*, Winter 1997-98, at 12

42 *Id.*

43 “Union Leader’s Aim: Deep Reform,” *The Seattle Times*, July 23, 1996

44 “Seattle Schools, Teachers Union Aim For Unusual Contract That Cuts To The Chase,” *The Seattle Times*, July 23, 1996

45 U.A.W. approval seen on Saturn pact,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 1985

46 *Trust Agreement Between Seattle School District No. 1 and Seattle Education Association*, 1996

While Stanford and Erskine had originally envisioned replacing the existing 300-page contract with a dramatically shorter, vastly more flexible version based on the GM-UAW Saturn agreement, this did not eventuate. Instead, in response to pushback from union members, its detailed requirements were actually left largely intact. However, as Stanford had sought, the contract was indeed amended to create hiring flexibility for principals by partially replacing the existing seniority-based staff placement system with a new site-based hiring system. (47)

The contract also included a new section titled “Site Based Decision Making,” intended to allay concerns among teachers about the potential for newly empowered principals to exclude them from core operational decisions. Article II guaranteed a role for educators in the decisions now reserved to schools, which were to include at least instructional models, the school’s budget, and the school’s professional development plan.

In keeping with the entrepreneurial spirit of the overall reforms, the contract did not spell out in any detail exactly how decisions should be made and by whom. This was left to each school decision-making team to define. (48) Critically, the contract also omitted to define exactly which operation decisions would be delegated to schools and which would be reserved to the central administration.

With the addition of these new sections to the Collective Bargaining Agreement, all of the basic elements for a competitive market-based system of schools were now more or less in place. Stanford described the result thus: “In effect, by creating competition among our schools, we have created “charter schools” within our district: We have enabled them to function independently in response to the needs and demands of their communities, and we have required them to succeed in the marketplace in order to stay in business.” (49)

Sadly, in early 1998, Stanford was diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia, and passed away that November. With the suddenness of his illness and death, Stanford had had time to do no more than create the initial structure in which the transformational change that he and the School Board envisioned could take place.



Stanford’s memorial in 1998, Courtesy: The Seattle Times

47 *Collective Bargaining Agreement between Seattle School District No. 1 and SEA Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees 1997-2000*, Article VIII
48 *Id.*, Article II, Section 3
49 Stanford, *id.*, at 164

While his charismatic leadership had allowed him to exercise “extraordinary personal influence” over developments, this had not yet translated to “permanent changes in the roles and missions of the school board, central office, teacher union or principals.”(50) By the time of his passing, “little had been institutionalized or made noticeable in the classroom.”(51)

Significantly, by this point the District’s previously existing decision-making structure had been uprooted but not yet rebuilt, since the work of rebuilding was intended to take place over time within the collaborative relationship envisioned by the 1996 Trust Agreement. However, the feasibility of that collaboration was initially heavily dependent on personal relationships, such as that between Stanford and Erskine.

Shortly after Stanford’s passing, Erskine was replaced by union leaders far less amenable to change(52), bringing an effective end to much of the active work of reform. In particular, the work of ensuring organizational accountability through the clear delineation of roles and responsibilities across the organization would never be conclusively revisited by the parties, leading to decades of unresolved struggle between and within organizational levels over the locus and extent of decision-making authority that continues to the present day.

Finally, it was not entirely clear how or whether Stanford’s market-based system of schools would address the underlying structural problems identified by the 1990 Cresap report, and which Stanford himself had noted on his arrival (53): fragmented program offerings, an organizational structure lacking in focus, neglect of planning and budgeting efforts, and the absence of “systems to hold the District accountable for its performance and to provide feedback on success.” It would now fall to Stanford’s successor to find a way forward.

III. “Educational entrepreneurs,” 1998-2003

After an unsuccessful search for a replacement with a background in education, in 1999 the School Board officially appointed to the superintendency Josephn Olchefske, who had risen to the position of Chief of Staff and then Acting Superintendent during Stanford’s illness. Asserting that Stanford’s reforms had now “creat[ed] school environments where educators had the freedom and resources required to address student needs,” (54) Olchefske said that if “the reforms stopped [at this point], we would have created chaos. We would have a laissez-faire model where schools are empowered without guidance and boundaries.”(55)

50 Hill et al., at 73

51 Id.

52 “Teachers’ union here seeks new director,” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 28, 1999

53 Stanford, *ibid*, at 3

54 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, *A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice* (2005), at 67

55 Leschly, “Seattle Public Schools, 1995-2002 (B): The Performance Agenda,” Harvard Business School Case Note 9-803-038, September 23, 2002

To address this, he now proposed a “Performance Agenda” that assumed that the missing ingredient in Stanford’s unfinished reforms was a set of student learning goals for which educators could be held personally accountable. He proposed to draw the goals from State learning standards set out in the *Student Learning and Improvement (Education Reform) Act* of 1993. (56)

Seattle Public Schools had long lagged behind other districts in implementing these standards, and in early 1999, Olchefske appointed a committee of SPS educators to align local reading, writing, communication, math and science curriculum to the standards. (57)

Once this work was complete, Olchefske told educators: “I expect every child to be at these standards. I’m going to leave it to your educational entrepreneurship to get the kids to the standards.” (58) This was to be done through the development by each school, through its own site-based decision making mechanism, of its own unique “Transformational Academic Achievement Plan.” (59)



Joseph Olchefske

The new emphasis on school autonomy meant that District support for this process would be mostly limited to providing principals an evidence-based rubric for school improvement, plus a final compliance review of each school’s Plan by central office managers of Special Education, Title I and other categorical programs. (60) While some schools had access to external grant-funded coaching for this planning work, most did not. As a result, the quality of plans varied widely according to school capacity. (61)

The continuing absence of role clarity in the new school-based management model often led to confusion at the school level during this process. While District leadership assumed that as professionals, principals and teachers would know what to do to translate the student learning goals in the Plans into practice, school staff tended to assume that the District would provide the guidance for doing so. (62) And while District leadership acknowledged the importance of professional development to ensuring educators had the knowledge and capacity to support the required student learning goals, they struggled to define and coordinate districtwide strategy. (63) The result was a patchwork of voluntary, often grant-supported teacher training that did not always align with District content or standards or provide educators with the necessary supports to implement the learning standards. (64)

56 “Olchefske Wants To Finish What He, Stanford Started”, The Seattle Times, January 19, 1999

57 “Olchefske: carrying on Stanford agenda, adding own touches,” The Seattle Times, January 30, 2000

58 “Seattle Schools’ New Standards About To Hit,” The Seattle Times, September 2, 1999

59 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, id, at 73

60 Id at 75

61 Id at 88

62 Id at 72

63 Id at 81

64 Id at 81

Principals, with their contractual accountability for student improvement, had primary responsibility for ensuring that Academic Plans were effectively implemented in their schools. As “CEOs”, they were of course also now responsible for managing the school’s budget, staffing and general operations. The small number of “school coordinators” (principal supervisors) each oversaw too many schools to be able to provide individual support, (65) and principals described existing administrator training and mentoring options as “all over the map.” (66) They were held accountable for outcomes all the same; in 2000, Olchefske very publicly demoted four principals for poor performance.(67) The end result was frustration: “You’re asking us to be budget professionals, budget for hiring, for instructional leadership, and you can’t do it all.” (68)

Principal dissatisfaction did eventually spur District leadership to acknowledge the need for the District to provide not just goals and punitive accountability, but also robust support for developing schools’ capacity to implement the required improvements. Thus, a “Focus Schools” program begun by Stanford that permitted a District takeover of persistently struggling schools was replaced under Olchefske with a “kindler, gentler” Support Initiative. (69) However, it quickly became apparent that the District itself lacked the internal resources to effectively carry it out. (70)

Partly in response to principal concerns around the workload associated with the new “CEO” model, and partly at the urging of the Gates Foundation (at this time a major SPS grantor), District leadership had also established a Central Office Transformation Task Force. (71) The Task Force was intended to expand central administrative capacity to support school improvement through the development of the characteristics of high-achieving school districts, including “distributed leadership, shared values, effective governance, quality staff development, and performance accountability.” (72) However, the Task Force was short-lived, and principals did not feel that it resulted in any significant improvement. (73)

Like principals, teachers also felt that they were not adequately supported in exercising their labor-intensive new responsibilities under the site-based decision-making model. While an attempt to subject educators to the same level of individual accountability for student outcomes as principals was ultimately unsuccessful, (74) union leaders nonetheless raised concerns about the effects of structural changes on educators, saying that there had been “too quick a move toward greater autonomy at the school level.” While SEA leaders conceded that the union had supported the move to school-based management, they asserted that school staff were inappropriately being required to engage in unfamiliar operational tasks like creating budgets “without adequate controls or training.” (75)

65 Id at 77

66 Id, at 90. One of the training options was the Principal Leadership Institute launched by Stanford to support development of principals’ new CEO role; it continues to this day, though much changed, in the form of the summer School Leaders Institute (SLI).

67⁴ Seattle principals demoted,” The Seattle Times, May 16, 2000

68 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, id, at 86

69“Assistance teams’ to check schools,” the Seattle Times, September 16, 1999; “Giving subpar schools a hand,” The Seattle Times, June 21, 2000

70 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, id, at 78

71 Id at 82

72 Id at 83

73 Id.

74“Under new yardstick, school is a winner,” The Seattle Times, November 7, 2000; Stig Leschly, “Transformation of Seattle Public Schools, 1995-2002,” Harvard Business School Case 802-197, April 2002, revised September 2002

75 “Why They So Dislike Olchefske,” The Seattle Medium, 2003

Families of color were also growing increasingly concerned about the effects of school reform on their students' educational experience. As early as 1994, families of color had been wary of the idea of school-based management, observing that its emphasis on "local control and 'majority-rules' decision making" would compound the marginalization they and their children already experienced in the District's schools.(76) In July 2000, a coalition of community organizations including El Centro de la Raza, People's Coalition for Justice, Voices of Samoa, Children's Alliance, Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites and others called on the School Board and District to recognize and address the fact that reform had not noticeably improved existing racial disproportionality in discipline, program access and academic outcomes. (77) By 2001, the Seattle Chapter of the NAACP threatened to file a 14th Amendment lawsuit over the District's continuing failure to do so. (78) While the District did subsequently launch several responsive initiatives, (79) these were largely left to schools to implement as they saw fit.

The consequences of ongoing confusion around the implementation of school-based management would become suddenly and dramatically apparent in the fall of 2002, when the district announced an unanticipated \$33 million budget hole attributable in part to building-level overspending due to the absence of "the kind of routine monitoring [...] that other districts take for granted." Central oversight of school finances was so sparse that District staff struggled to piece together exactly where the problem lay.(80) A subsequent external audit of events leading to the crisis confirmed that the District's overall hands-off approach schools had played a central role:

The District's financial problems appear to have been exacerbated by continued changes, including the impacts of delegating new authorities to the schools. The process of empowering schools to make their own decisions led to an unintended consequence; that is, Central Office administration processes became disconnected from schools, which further contributed to a loss of budgetary control...[N]umerous disconnects in business practices existed between schools and the Central Office; the groups were not fully integrated. (81)

The revelation of the deficit caused an immediate uproar. While the School Board continued to pledge its support of the Superintendent, SEA and the Principals' Association of Seattle Schools both passed no-confidence votes in the Superintendent's leadership,(82) and community groups threatened to oppose a critical upcoming levy. (83) The School Board during these years had not implemented the Cresap audit's recommendations on board governance and oversight, and its deferential relationship to the Superintendent was now roundly criticized. One local columnist channeled community anger in urging Board members "to go from seat warmers with ink pads to a true policy-making body with strong oversight." (84)

76 "School plan worries ethnic groups," The Seattle Times, July 13, 1994

77 "Series of frustrations led to School Board protest," The Seattle Times, July 7, 2000

78 "NAACP may sue Seattle schools," The Seattle Times, September 28, 2001

79 Seattle Public Schools, *Eliminating the Achievement Gap: A Report to the Community* (2003)

80 "How Seattle schools botched their budget by \$33 million," The Seattle Times, Oct 23, 2002

81 Moss Adams LLP, *Seattle Public Schools Financial Operations and Information Systems Audit*, April 16, 2003, at 2

82 "A superintendent who sailed in finds rough seas now," The Seattle Times, April 2, 2003

83 "School group threatens to fight levies," The Seattle Times, April 3, 2003

84 "The end of an affair," The Seattle Times, October 29, 2002

With levies under threat, Olchefske announced in the spring of 2003 that he would resign at the end of the school year. (85) His model of “educational entrepreneurialism” - setting high standards for student performance, leaving it to schools to figure out how to get all students there, and threatening principals with punishment if they did not - had not operated as an effective model for school improvement. (86) If anything, it had exacerbated the fragmentation that had characterized the District in 1990. The urgent need to address the failure of decentralization to lead to consistent school improvement for all groups of students (87) would be the critical challenge facing the next Superintendent and School Board.

IV. “Closing the Achievement Gap,” 2003-2007

The district’s Chief Operating Officer, Raj Manhas, who had been part of the executive team that resolved the financial crisis, now became interim Superintendent. Described as “intelligent, humble and kind-hearted,”(88) Manhas, like Stanford and Olchefske before him, lacked a background in education. He was appointed permanent superintendent in October 2003 after a contentious national search ended with all four candidates dropping out. (89)



Raj Manhas, Courtesy: The Seattle Times

The following month, four new directors replaced incumbents on the School Board, swept in on a wave of outrage over the financial crisis and associated allegations of failed Board oversight. (90) The previous Board’s “quiet, collegial style” had become a “political liability” during the financial crisis. (91) Newly elected members had campaigned on bringing a more adversarial orientation to the relationship between the Board and the Superintendent, as well as skepticism of the business-oriented model of school management that was Stanford and Olchefske’s legacy.(92)

85 “Advisers troubled by audit’s findings,” The Seattle Times, April 18, 20

86 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, id, at 91

87 “Blink and you’ll miss Seattle schools’ strategy,” The Seattle Times, June 16, 2002

88 “The accidental leader can’t do it by himself,” The Seattle Times, October 28, 2003

89 “Seattle schools chief faces new challenges,” The Seattle Times, October 12, 2003

90 “3 schools incumbents voted off board,” November 5, 2003

90 “3 schools incumbents voted off board,” November 5, 2003

91 “Year of upheaval tests Seattle School Board,” The Seattle Times, July 9, 2003

92 Id.

At the same time, the standards-based accountability elements of that legacy were now incorporated in the new and controversial Federal *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 (“NCLB”), (93) which required States to uniformly raise students across all schools in all districts to 100% academic proficiency by 2014. Continued Federal education funding would be conditional on demonstrating “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) at all levels toward this goal, and states were required to impose increasingly draconian consequences on schools and districts failing to demonstrate the required AYP.



Board Members Sally Soriano, Darlene Flynn, Brita Butler-Wall and Irene Stewart, Courtesy: The Seattle Times

While the strong commitment to local control in Washington State meant that these requirements were never fully applied to districts, (94) the reporting requirements of the law did operate to keep disparities in academic performance between groups of students in public view. The resulting pressure, combined with ongoing discontent among educators, principals and families of color with the rollout of the school-based management model, created an environment in which multiple stakeholders were now open to meaningful change.



President George W. Bush signs the No Child Left Behind Act at Hamilton High School on Jan. 8, 2002. Courtesy: Associated Press

The renegotiation in mid-2004 of the expiring Collective Bargaining Agreement with SEA was an early example. Article II, originally called “Site Based Decision Making,” was renamed “Partnership for Closing the Achievement Gap.” While the terms providing for school-based Building Leadership Teams remained unchanged, a new Partnership Committee was added to the contract. The new Committee was intended to be a vehicle through which the parties would jointly develop a monitoring, evaluation and intervention system for schools struggling to improve student outcomes. Such a system implied at least the potential for reduced autonomy and stronger central direction for some lower-performing schools.

93 20 U.S.C. § 6319

94 “Federal hammer to fall on schools?” The Seattle Times, August 26, 2005

This was followed in 2005 by the launch of a joint SPS-SEA “Flight Schools” initiative that was to be “the testing ground for the new contract provisions.” (95) The grant-funded initiative, which would run until 2009, focused on Rainier Beach High School and its feeder elementary and middle schools. These schools would forgo control over operational decisions in order to receive robust, coordinated support to implement research-tested school improvement strategies, such as alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instruction, the development of professional learning communities, family and community engagement, and culturally responsive teaching. (96)



Rainier Beach High School, 2000, Photograph by Mary Randlett Courtesy Seattle Public Schools

At this time, key elements of the school-based management model began to come increasingly under scrutiny outside of the context of struggling schools. In remarks to the School Board, Chief Academic Officer Steve Wilson challenged the deference to each school in choosing its own curriculum and instructional methodology in the face of evidence that it “may not be working to help students learn better [...] in some instances.”(97) Wilson called for a standardized districtwide curriculum in core subjects, as well as the imposition of escalating interventions in struggling schools modeled on those in the NCLB law. While his suggestions were met with pushback, they laid the groundwork for his successor, Carla Santorno, who the following year would begin this work in earnest.

School-based budgeting also now came under review when the internal Student Funding Committee began to consider abandoning the dollar-denominated student-weighted funding formula.(98) Principals increasingly complained that the labor of creating building-level budgets required “a large investment of time from school staff for only a small amount of truly discretionary funding,”(99) since “most funding sources are restricted to specific staffing or purchases based on state funding, grant or contractual requirements and basic operation costs.” (100)

Simultaneously, in an attempt to promote much-needed organizational coherence, Superintendent Manhas launched a strategic planning initiative for the District, which until this point had not had “measurable goals and strategies for how [it could] reach them.” (101) A set of consensus goals had the potential to provide the missing element of unified direction for decision-making throughout what was now an intensely decentralized organization. The result was the April 2005 Plan for Student Success. It outlined five systemwide goals (though without associated metrics): (1) improve instruction for all students; (2) eliminate the achievement gap; (3) eliminate all systemic barriers to student achievement; (4) build leadership capacity, and (5) “manage resources and set priorities using principles of equity and sustainability.” (102) The School Board adopted the Plan in a characteristic split vote of 4-2. (103)

95 “\$2.5 million sought for 9 schools in South End,” *The Seattle Times*, February 28, 2005

96 “Seattle schools win NEA grant to bolster diversity,” *The Seattle Times*, April 5, 2006; Seattle Public Schools, *Flight Initiative – Closing the Achievement Gap, Final Report and Impact Statement*, June 30, 2009

97 “Proposal would reduce schools’ self-rule,” *The Seattle Times*, June 23, 2005

98 School Board Action Report, “2008-09 Student Funding Allocations: Approval to transition to a Weighted Staffing Standard model for school funding in FY 08-09,” January 17, 20

99 *Id.*

100 *Id.*

101 “Seattle schools chief faces new challenges,” *The Seattle Times*, October 12, 2003

102 *Seattle Public Schools Plan for Student Success, School Years 2005/6 through 2009/10*, May 2005

103 “Saving schools, a public responsibility,” *The Seattle Times*, May 22, 2005

Hundreds of strategies were identified to support the Plan's goals, carrying a price tag of almost \$50 million. Identifying funding sources posed an immediate challenge in the face of an underlying structural deficit of almost \$30 million, along with \$16 million in increases promised in the 2004 CBA to make teacher salaries competitive with neighboring districts. (104) In late 2004, Finance Director Steven Nielsen had warned that the District would become insolvent by 2006 and be placed under State supervision if no action was taken. (105) With increased State funding unlikely, there was "no revenue source that [could] reliably finance [the deficit] other than changing the system's basic structure." (106)

During 2004 CBA negotiations, both parties had acknowledged that major structural and operating changes would be required to support its costs. (107) The most obvious target was the District's "current student assignment plan, the number of schools in operation, and the related transportation costs." (108) Enrollment had fallen precipitously since the 1970s, but little had been done to adjust capacity accordingly. (109) In late 2003, the district's Student Funding Committee, made up of District leadership, principals and SEA representatives, had recommended that small schools finally be closed as originally envisioned by Stanford and Olchefske and the District "resize[d] to fit current enrollment." (110)

Manhas now submitted to the School Board a restructuring plan that would close and consolidate between 12 and 24 under-enrolled schools, and cut transportation costs by drastically reducing school choice. (111) However, he immediately encountered heated resistance from families, as well as from the School Board, (112) whose majority members - those elected in the 2003 backlash - had by this point developed a reputation for open disregard of the Superintendent and District staff (113), for "contradictory edicts" to District leadership, for micromanaging day-to-day staff work, and for an inability to "unify around a single issue" (114), as evidenced by the growing number of split votes on critical issues.

In this, it appeared that the parties were recapitulating the dysfunctional situation auditors had observed in 1990, as the Superintendent, in his turn, was developing a complementary reputation for allowing Board members to encroach upon his administrative role. In response to community and Board pressure, Manhas now announced that he would suspend his closure proposals and appoint an external committee of community leaders to "review our funding challenges [and] help with the realignment of our budget to better support the academic initiatives in our five-year plan." (115)

104 "Teachers to vote on 5-year contract," The Seattle Times, August 31, 2004

105 "Financial news gets worse for Seattle schools," The Seattle Times, December 16, 2004

106 "School closures on table," The Seattle Times, December 9, 2004

107 "Closures tied to teachers contract," The Seattle Times, May 16, 2005

108 Id.

109 Cresap, id at I-1

110 "Schools with low enrollment may close," The Seattle Times, April 15, 2004

111 "10 Seattle schools targeted for closure," The Seattle Times, April 21, 2005

112 "School-closure plan feels heat," The Seattle Times, May 5, 2005

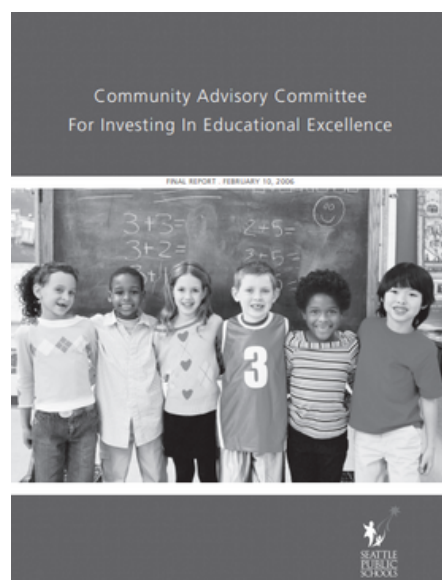
113 "School board fails to quell disharmony over schools," The Seattle Times, October 4, 2004

114 "Saving schools, a public responsibility," The Seattle Times, May 22, 2005

115 "Superintendent Raj Manhas' statement," The Seattle Times, May 17, 2005

The result was the Community Advisory Committee on Investing for Educational Excellence (CACIEE), chartered in July 2005. Its fifteen members included parents, District staff, business and community leaders, representatives of community-based organizations, and local academics. CACIEE was directed to “develop recommendations on establishing short- and long-term fiscal stability support of academic achievement for Seattle Public Schools.” In support of this process, CACIEE undertook six months of extensive community outreach, including telephone surveys, focus groups, market research, community meetings and the collection of feedback via email and postal mail. (116)

In February 2006, the Committee released its final report. As Cresap auditors had discovered in 1990, CACIEE found that “the District’s financial challenges could not be viewed isolation, but rather were symptoms of broader systemic and organizational issues.” (117) As in the 1990 audit, the most significant of these was the lack of role clarity between District staff and the School Board, leading to multiple conflicting directives, turf wars, and lack of organizational direction. CACIEE called on the Board to “more clearly define its roles and responsibilities relative to District staff through the adoption of a policy governance model.” Such a model would keep Board members focused on their legally aligned tasks of “policy setting and strategy rather than on operational details,” and on “[r]igorously evaluat[ing] the accomplishments of the organization.” (118) The report described this as one “of the highest-yield investments the District can make.” (119)



CACIEE releases final report with recommendations. Courtesy: SPS

CACIEE also observed that the absence of goal-setting and “rigorous evaluation” by the Board had made possible the loss of organizational coherence that had first become so catastrophically apparent in 2003: “Over the last ten years, the District decentralized extensively without building in a strong quality control function.” (120) CACIEE urged that this function “must now be built and accountability strengthened.” (121) Echoing some of the initiatives already underway in the District, it recommended that this be done by adjusting the existing school-based management model to include the concept of “earned autonomy”:

Leadership should develop a clear set of criteria and an assessment process that will determine each school’s level of autonomy [...] Schools that meet or exceed expectations can – and should be encouraged to – operate with a high degree of autonomy, having earned that right. However, low performing schools need to follow more prescriptive improvement protocols to ensure that every school is indeed a quality school and that every student has access to a quality education. (122)

116 Community Advisory Committee for Investing in Education Excellence, *Final Report*, February 10, 2006, at 8

117 *Id.*, at 6

118 *Id.*, at 12

119 *Id.*

120 *Id.*, at 15

121 *Id.*

122 *Id.*

The School Board did subsequently take up the topic of accountability, directing the Superintendent in September 2005 to prepare an “accountability plan” for student achievement. The plan was required to “address the entire personnel continuum including hiring practices, job descriptions, clear performance expectations tied to academic achievement, periodic monitoring, training and support, evaluations based on the predetermined expectations, and consequences for failure to meet expected outcomes.” The Superintendent responded quickly, producing a detailed Draft Accountability Work Plan the following month. (123) The Board did not, however, address CACIEE’s recommendations around governance and role clarity. One member of the Board majority flatly rejected them, saying, “I don’t think lockstep speaking with one voice is the way you want a governing body to work.” (124)

The persistence of role confusion and the Board’s lack of policy direction would prove deeply problematic when the Board moved forward with Manhas’ school closure proposal from the previous year. (125) In March 2006, the Board appointed a “Community Advisory Committee on School Facilities and Programs” and tasked it with creating a list of schools for closure. (126) After releasing a preliminary list of 12 schools, the committee held a series of town hall meetings that saw thousands of energized parent protesters “arriving in droves wearing matching shirts and even passing out water bottles emblazoned with slogans.” (127)

In the lead-up to the official vote on a final slate of schools for closure, the Board and Superintendent alike were subjected to intense pressure from affected school communities, and multiple schools serving white-majority and affluent neighborhoods were ultimately removed from consideration. (128) As a result, the final list of seven proposed by the Superintendent skewed heavily toward schools attended primarily by students of color and students living in poverty in the southeastern part of the District. (129) A divided School Board approved the closure proposal in yet another split vote of 5-2, whereupon the dissenters joined a community lawsuit against the majority over the disproportionate impact of the approved closures on students of color. (130)

The Superintendent was also tasked by the Board majority with recommending four additional schools in the central, northern, and western parts of the city for closure. This second proposal included a pair of alternative schools popular with white families, which set off another round of intensive and often acrimonious community lobbying. This supercharged political environment led to a chaotic six-hour Board meeting to vote on the second list that was marked by four hours of emotional testimony, chanting, racial slurs against the Superintendent, and civil disobedience. The Board voted, yet again along split 5-2 lines, to table the second round of closures indefinitely. (131)

123 *Accountability Work Plan Presented to the Seattle School Board*, October 12, 2005; revised November 30, 2005

124 “School closure plans stir doubts,” *The Seattle Times*, May 15, 2006

125 “Some schools to close in 2007,” *The Seattle Times*, January 26, 2006

126 “District may close 12 schools in Seattle,” *The Seattle Times*, March 2, 2006

127 “Graham Hill may remain open,” *The Seattle Times*, July 6, 2006

128 “9 schools in Seattle targeted for closure,” *The Seattle Times*, May 18, 2006

129 “Race may be a big issue in school closures,” *The Seattle Times*, May 19, 2006

130 “Group files suit over closures of Seattle schools,” *The Seattle Times*, August 23, 2006; “Wanted: functioning school board,” *The Seattle Times*, October 12, 2006

131 “Seattle school meeting turns unruly,” *The Seattle Times*, October 5, 2006

Shortly afterwards, the Superintendent announced that he would step down at the end of the 2006-07 school year. (132) A few months later, a community “Committee to Stop All School Closures” unsuccessfully filed suit to recall the five Board members who had voted for the initial set of closures. (133) The Board’s role in the chaotic proceedings raised such strong concern among the city’s political leadership that then-Mayor Greg Nickels seriously considered bringing schools under mayoral control, (134) and three of Seattle’s State legislators filed a bill that would permit school boards to be appointed. (135)



Maria Goodloe-Johnson on her first day on the job touring Northgate Elementary. Courtesy: Paul Joseph Brown/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

While these efforts were ultimately abandoned, the deeply divided School Board now needed to hire yet another Superintendent. In April 2007, after a national search ended with all other candidates withdrawing, the Board appointed the sole remaining candidate to the position. Dr. Maria Goodloe-Johnson, a veteran African American educator who had worked in Charleston, SC and Denver, CO as a special education teacher, a high-school principal, a secondary education director, an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent, would be the first superintendent of Seattle Public Schools in over a decade with a background in education. (136)

V. “Quality control,” 2007-2011

Shortly after Goodloe-Johnson’s arrival, a regular School Board election saw the replacement of the Board majority that had been elected in the wake of the 2003 financial crisis. (137) Another pendulum swing now occurred: their replacements, some of whom drew strong support from the local business community(138), campaigned pointedly on a platform of effective governance and depoliticization of the Board’s work. (139) New directors saw their task as working with the Superintendent to focus “on the large, over-the-horizon issues, not [on] trying to manage the district as a group of seven.” (140)

132 “Manhas heading out; who’d want this job?” The Seattle Times, October 24, 2006

133 “School Board recall charges to be heard,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, January 21, 2007; “Judge Rejects Recall Petition,” The Seattle Medium, February 7, 2007

134 “Nickels urged to take some control of schools,” The Seattle Times, November 20, 2006

135 “Seattle Schools’ Governance Under Fire,” Education Week, February 2, 2007

136 “Suddenly, choice became easier,” The Seattle Times, April 13, 2007

137 “Why voters expelled the Seattle School Board class of 2003,” Crosscut, November 8, 2007

138 “Election gives Seattle School Board a new, unified voice,” The Seattle Times, November 8, 2007

139 “Candidates differ on school-board strategy,” The Seattle Times, October 11, 2007

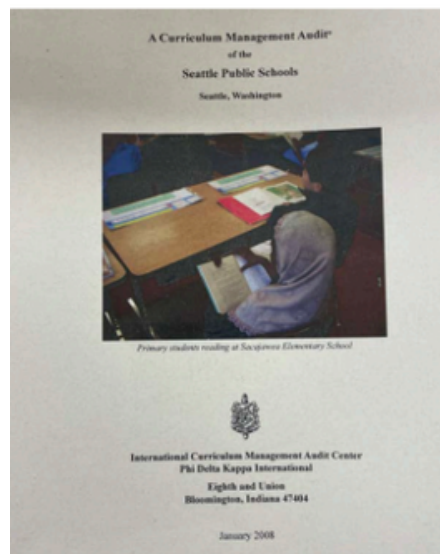
140 “Activist who promised school-board scrutiny now accused of micromanaging,” The Seattle Times, October 8, 2007

The new Board's approach created the opportunity for District staff to focus on the work of systemwide improvement that had begun under Superintendent Manhas prior to the school consolidation controversy. The new Superintendent now observed that "We've been all over the board, and everybody's been doing a lot of different things." Echoing the CACIEE report, she noted that "the way the district is set up now [...] you have no quality control." That, she reflected, "leaves student learning to chance." (141) She indicated that addressing the inconsistency of the student learning experience across the district would be her primary priority.

Some work on addressing the weaknesses of school-based management that had emerged in the wake of the 2003 budget crisis had in fact continued in the background of the school consolidation controversy. Since her arrival in April 2006, Chief Academic Officer Carla Santorno had been building on her predecessor Steve Wilson's suggestion of standardizing curriculum in order to create consistency for students and greater access to central office support for schools. Despite resistance from families and educators, she had already taken preliminary steps toward the implementation of a uniform math curriculum at the elementary level, with plans to add additional district-wide curriculum for social studies and reading. (142)

She had also ordered an extensive series of peer reviews and audits of the District's major academic programs prior to Goodloe-Johnson's arrival, and final reports were now being delivered. They uniformly demonstrated that Seattle had precisely the kind of "laissez-faire model where schools were empowered without guidance and boundaries" that Olchefske had feared would develop in the absence of standards-based accountability. But it was now clear - in Seattle, and increasingly nationally - that the mere existence of standards and expectations was not sufficient to prevent the "chaos" Olchefske had hoped to avoid.

The most comprehensive report - a 358-page curriculum audit by Phi Delta Kappa International - painted a portrait of a district in which strategic coherence had become effectively impossible because it had "been functioning for the past decade as individual school sites with little central control or coordinated centralized efforts." (143) Overall, the audit found that "site-based management, established over a decade ago, has resulted in a culture of autonomy" that had "fragmented the system and diluted accountability." Since the District had started on the path of reform with an "organizational structure [that] lacked focus," (144) reform had not addressed but had rather greatly exacerbated its underlying structural weaknesses. One internal interviewee noted: "We ended up with 100 plus separate school systems; we've been working [since 2003] to bring them back into alignment." (145)



Phi Delta Kappa's *Curriculum Management Audit Report*, January 2008

141 "Schools changing course," *The Seattle Times*, October 15, 2007

142 "Academic chief tries to make grade," *The Seattle Times*, May 16, 2007

143 International Curriculum Management Audit Center, Phi Delta Kappa International, *A Curriculum Management Audit of the Seattle Public Schools*, January 2008

144 Cresap, id at I-6

145 International Curriculum Management Audit Center, Phi Delta Kappa International, id at 46

The report found that the continuing absence of measurable systemwide goals and the delegation of strategy almost entirely to the school level had had dire effects on planning, monitoring, workforce development, the alignment of budget and goals - and, most significantly, on outcomes for students. (146) Despite high-level commitments to racial equity, the auditors discovered that by making “the implementation of most practices and programs [...] building dependent,” (147) the autonomy framework had led to severe inequities in terms of access to programs, services, and opportunities for students of color and students living in poverty. (148) Auditors observed that “site-based management practices in Seattle Public Schools contribute to inequalities in student access to programs, services and opportunities” and that “site-based decision making has contributed to inequalities among schools.” (149)

The audit advised that “continued emphasis on achievement for every child will require that this framework change to one that is centrally coordinated.” (150) This observation was echoed in additional reports, each by a different organization, that examined programs that disproportionately served the District’s students of color and students living in poverty:

- An audit of the District’s Bilingual Education program observed an “abdication by the central office of any meaningful responsibility for service to English language learners at the school level.” The lack of central direction had led to the development of “a series of disconnected activities pulled together under the heading of ‘bilingual education’ that are actually the by-products of the school system’s long-standing site-based management approach to reform.” (151) The program lacked support and instructional coherence, and bilingual learners - overwhelmingly newcomer students of color - were poorly served as a result.
- A separate review of the District’s Special Education programs, which disproportionately served students of color, found that because “the school district has a legacy of operating in a very decentralized manner[,] school principals and Building Leadership Teams can choose how inclusive they wish their buildings to be” - which, in combination with a lack of central support for the implementation of best practices, had resulted in the widespread segregation of students with disabilities in siloed programs away from general education environments. (152)

Yet another group of reviewers identified analogous outcomes from a similar absence of central oversight of the Accelerated Progress Program for advanced scholars: “The Accelerated Progress Program . . . rests atop an outdated philosophy, is hobbled by inconsistent quality in curriculum and teacher training, and is diminished by an absence of racial and socioeconomic diversity.” (153)

Some of the audits noted that Superintendent Manhas’s Five-Year Plan had, in fact, accurately identified many of these problems and had included strategies to address them. With funding from the Gates Foundation, (154) a cross-departmental Strategic Implementation Team (SIT) had been charged by Superintendent Manhas with the task of implementing the Plan’s extensive strategies while also “strik[ing] a balance between the principles of site-based management and District-wide standards.” (155)

146 Id at 313

147 Id at 210

148 Id at 170

149 Id at 191-192

150 Id at 357

151 *Raising the Achievement of English Language Learners in the Seattle Public Schools: Report of the Strategic Support Team of the Council of the Great City Schools*, Summer 2008

152 *Special Education: Organizational, Program, and Service Delivery Review, Seattle Public Schools, A Report of the External Core Team*, Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative Education Development Center, Inc., July 2007

153 “Holding on, and helping academic achievement,” *The Seattle Times*, December 7, 2007

154 “Commitment to Seattle Public Schools – Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,” Press Release, May 2006

155 *Seattle Public Schools, 2005-2006 Superintendent’s Evaluation*, September 12, 2006

However, the SIT had made little progress in the intervening period, because it remained unclear whether and how, in a system of autonomous schools, central administration could, in fact, require school sites to implement Districtwide directives. (156)

Auditors observed that the fragmentation of District operations by the move to school-level autonomy could not have occurred had the School Board consistently provided coordinated policy direction to the Superintendent. They stated that future improvements in system functioning and student outcomes would be contingent “on a viable, valid, comprehensive, and focused board policy framework.” Building this framework would create the possibility for other system improvements: “Of all the requisite conditions necessary to put into place for an improved curriculum management system in the Seattle Public Schools, this one piece is fundamental.” (157)

The audit predicted that the District’s culture of school autonomy would “prove challenging to change,” (158) but Superintendent Goodloe-Johnson now set about to change it. In November 2007, she engaged the consulting firm McKinsey Company to help the District develop a revised Strategic Plan with metrics. After reviewing the audit reports and conducting over 1,500 interviews with leadership, staff, families, students and community groups, McKinsey recommended five priority areas for inclusion in a strategic plan, including improvements to learning and teaching, supporting District talent, expanding Central Office capacity, creating a performance management system, and improving stakeholder engagement. (159)



A new McKinsey commissioned strategic plan was published in June 2008.

The Superintendent built on McKinsey’s recommendations, along with all of the external reports commissioned since the Moss Adams budget report of 2003, to create a 50-page Strategic Plan that identified systemwide barriers to student achievement and, for the first time, measurable goals for academic outcomes. These included metrics for 3rd grade reading, 7th grade math, and high school graduation.(160) The Plan also contained a short, targeted set of strategies tailored to address the specific barriers identified to raising student achievement. It included common district wide curriculum and assessments, and a framework for direct central office oversight and management of school performance. The School Board unanimously approved the new Strategic Plan in June 2008 (161), and with it, an apparent end to the District’s decade-long experiment with a philosophy of competitive, autonomous, “market-based” schools.

156 International Curriculum Management Audit Center, Phi Delta Kappa International, id at 313

157 Id at 358

158 Id at 357

159 McKinsey and Company, *Developing a Strategic Plan for Academic Success for Seattle Public Schools*, March 17, 2008, at 17-18

160 *Excellence for All: Seattle Public Schools Strategic Plan*, June 2008, at 1-2

161 “Seattle School Board OKs ambitious goals,” *The Seattle Times*, June 5, 2008

The market-based schools model was further eroded in the 2008-09 school year through a major change in the District's school funding allocation mechanism. The new mechanism shifted from Olchefske's discretionary allocation via a weighted student formula designated in dollars, to a new "weighted staffing standard" designated in staff FTE which translated the District's statutory and contractual obligations to the building level. This change, originally suggested by the District's Student Funding Committee in 2005, was intended to "maintain the benefits of the weighted student formula and school-based decision making, by eliminating time and complexity." (162) At the same time, it also eliminated a core element of Stanford's market-based philosophy.

With budget discretion and curricular control largely removed from schools, the School Board now moved to end yet another critical plank of that philosophy: open school choice. In tandem with student-linked funding, school-level budget control, and closure of under-enrolled schools, "customer" choice in schools had been intended to create market-style accountability. However, it had never worked this way, partly because of strong community resistance to closing schools, and also because those families whose children were least likely to be adequately served by their local school were also those least likely to be able to "navigate the complicated system" of school choice. (163)

In June 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court had held in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* that the open choice system's "integration-positive" tiebreaker was unconstitutional. (164) In 2009, the School Board took this opportunity to approve a new Student Assignment Plan (SAP) to be phased in during the 2010-11 school year. The new SAP ended almost 30 years of school integration initiatives and returned Seattle to a system of neighborhood school assignment with limited school choice. It also eliminated one of the few remaining vestiges of the market-based school system.

This seismic change was followed soon after by a fresh round of school closures. These had been spurred by a 2008 report by the State Auditor's Office that found that the District had "18 percent more classrooms than students to fill them" and recommended further capacity reductions. (165) The closures were also intended to address a \$24 million shortfall projected for the 2009-10 school year resulting from State budget cuts in response to the Great Recession. (166) The closures (some of which were reversed not long after due to unexpected enrollment gains) (167) added to growing discontent with the new Superintendent's leadership - particularly her perceived lack of connection to and understanding of the community she served.

162 Seattle Public Schools, "Weighted Staffing Standards: A Change to the Formula for Allocating Budget Resources to Schools - Frequently Asked Questions," October 10, 2007

163 Seattle Public Schools, *Student Assignment Plan Approved June 17, 2009, Updated July 1, 2009*

164 551 US 701 (2007)

165 State Auditor's Office, *Performance Audit Report: School Districts' Administration and Support Services, Report No. 1000013*, September 30, 2008

166 "Seattle Schools: A Crisis of Confidence," *Seattle's Child*, February 1, 2009

167 "Seattle Schools: Closing One Day, Open Another," *Seattle Weekly*, October 20, 2009

Goodloe-Johnson had indicated early in her tenure that she would have little patience for the “Seattle Process” of extensive deliberation and consultation with major constituencies before the making of difficult decisions. She was not deterred by her predecessor’s treatment at the hands of an irate community, saying of the superintendency: “It’s not a popularity contest. It’s about making decisions that are good for kids.” Now, with school closures once again roiling the community, when asked “how much sleep she[d] lost” over the process,” she drew anger with her response: “What you need to know about me is that I don’t lose sleep.” (168)

The Superintendent was regarded with suspicion by the educators’ union early in her tenure since she had come to Seattle from a non-unionized district and was felt not to be “well-versed in contract language.” (169) They clashed openly in 2008 with the hiring of McKinsey & Co, which was identified with the controversial national education reform movement, to support the development of the strategic plan. SEA membership voted to “view any consultation with McKinsey and Company as a serious, but unintentional error which impinges on good faith bargaining,” (170) and its members had been advised not to participate in strategic planning activities.

By this time, Goodloe-Johnson had also come increasingly to be identified with the national education reform movement, whose deep unpopularity was at this time reaching its peak across the country. The fact that she was a graduate of the Broad Superintendents’ Academy, a business-oriented administrator training program founded by billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad, (171) raised concern that her goal was to fully implement the Federal No Child Left Behind law and its punitive standards-based accountability system - whose effects on local districts Washington State (with its commitment to local control of education) had so far managed largely to attenuate. (172)

These concerns deepened in 2010, when the Superintendent laid out a Performance Management Plan, initially envisioned in the 2008 Strategic Plan, that incorporated the more controversial elements of the No Child Left Behind legislation to create a system of multi-level accountability for student outcomes. The plan would involve “close monitoring and regular reporting on progress, differentiated supports and interventions, and consistent consequences based on performance.” Data-validated performance levels would be regularly reported to the public and would affect the level of autonomy afforded to individual schools. (173)

168 “In Seattle schools, no doubt who’s in charge,” The Seattle Times, March 8, 2009

169 “Plan splits district, teachers,” The Seattle Times, December 2, 2007

170 Id.

171 “Boot Camp for Education CEOs: The Broad Foundation Superintendents Academy,” Rethinking Schools, Fall 2012

172 “Why Do Teachers Hate Goodloe-Johnson?” Seattle Weekly, June 22, 2010

173 “Seattle Schools superintendent sets ambitious agenda,” The Seattle Times, July 6, 2010

Successful schools, as measured by student performance and growth, along with the gap between “high poverty and low poverty” students, would be granted “earned autonomy.” However, schools that were not successful, by the same measures, would , after three years, be subject to increasing District-level direction. Echoing the No Child Left Behind law, the District could take increasingly draconian steps in cases of persistent underperformance, including changes to school leadership and staff, or even “reconstitution” or closure of the school.

The Performance Management Plan was adopted as School Board policy (174), and a District Scorecard was developed to publicly report measures of student achievement and growth. Schools would be “segmented” on the Scorecard into quintiles based on aggregated student test scores, student growth, and the size of the “achievement gap” within a school, permitting the identification of consistent underperforming schools for reduced autonomy and escalating central intervention.(175)

Then, during the process of renegotiating the District’s Collective Bargaining Agreement with SEA in 2010, the Superintendent sought to implement the Strategic Plan’s vision for educator-level accountability for student outcomes. The District now proposed to add a student growth component to individual teacher evaluations. (176) As part of the Strategic Plan work to standardize curriculum districtwide, the District had recently introduced a common K-12 classroom assessment called the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test; it was now proposed to use the results of this testing as part of the review process for educators, initially on a voluntary basis.

There was at this time a significant reservoir of community support, if not for the Superintendent herself (who was encountering increasing levels of criticism across the community) (177), then for greater systemwide accountability for student achievement. In April 2010, two separate community coalitions, collectively representing over 35 local organizations and individuals, released statements in support of including student growth data in teacher evaluations, as well as for adding effectiveness to seniority as a factor in staffing decisions, merit pay of educators, and faster removal of ineffective teachers from the classroom. (178)

SEA was in favor of expanding the existing “satisfactory/unsatisfactory” teacher rating system to a more extensive, four-part evaluation system based on broadly accepted instructional frameworks. But the union was staunchly opposed to the inclusion of MAP and other standardized test data based on national research showing that due to the presence of a large number of confounding variables, student test scores were “not a reliable measure of teacher quality.” (179) In the event, the parties agreed to include student data as a potential trigger for additional observations, mentoring and professional development. (180)

174 *Policy A0.200: Performance Management Plan*, March 2010

175 “Seattle Schools superintendent sets ambitious agenda,” *The Seattle Times*, July 6, 2010

176 “Tension grows over Seattle teacher evaluations” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 5, 2010; “Showdown over how to grade teachers,” *The Seattle Times*, August 15, 2010; “Meeting airs split over how to judge Seattle teachers,” *The Seattle Times*, August 19, 2010

177 “Maria Goodloe-Johnson timeline,” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 1, 2011

178 Our Schools Coalition, “An Open Letter to Seattle Public School Parents,” August 3, 2010; Seattle Organizers for Community Engagement in Education, “A community value statement in support of public schools,” March 1, 2010

179 “District, teachers think they have deal,” *The Seattle Times*, August 31, 2010

180 *Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools And Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees, 2010-2013*, Article XI, Section G

At the same time that the CBA was approved, union membership also approved a no-confidence vote in the Superintendent, reflecting their “deep dissatisfaction with the superintendent's style and agenda” (181), including the steady erosion of contractually-guaranteed school and educator autonomy under Goodloe-Johnson’s superintendency. (182) They called for the Superintendent to work with them collaboratively “instead of mandating everything that should happen.” They expressed concern over budget cuts, financial management, and the introduction of MAP testing, raising ethical questions over the Superintendent’s membership in the board of the organization that owned the new tests. (183)

Community concerns about the Superintendent had also been growing as a result of a highly critical State audit of District operations delivered in mid-2010. The audit found that, over time, “the School Board and District management [had] not implemented sufficient policies and controls to ensure the District complies with state laws, its own policies, or addresses concerns identified in prior audits.”(184) It found that the Superintendent was insufficiently familiar with relevant State law and policy, and that the Board had “not provide[d] oversight to ensure laws and policies are followed.” It recommended that the District establish internal controls to ensure legal compliance, and that both Board and management “be more involved in District operations.”

In early 2011, before either Board or management had responded to the audit findings, the District’s small business development program was discovered to have been beset by internal fraud, costing the District over \$3 million. External audits showed that the fraud had occurred due to insufficient internal oversight, including the Superintendent’s failure to act on clear evidence presented to her of financial mismanagement, and her maintenance of what was described as “a management culture that bred an ‘atmosphere of fear and intimidation.’” (185) In March 2011, with community anger boiling over, Goodloe-Johnson was fired by the School Board. (186)

181 “Seattle teachers OK contract, disapprove of Superintendent,” The Seattle Times, September 3, 2010

182 “Why Do Teachers Hate Goodloe-Johnson?” Seattle Weekly, June 22, 2010

183 “Goodloe-Johnson Conflict of Interest in \$370,000 Contract”, Seattle Met, February 12, 2010

184 Washington State Auditor’s Office, *Accountability Audit Report, Seattle School District No. 1, King County, Report No. 1003871*, June 21, 2010

185 “Goodloe-Johnson ousted as Seattle schools chief,” The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 1, 2011

186 “Schools shake-up - Superintendent ousted in financial scandal,” The Seattle Times, March 3, 2011

VI. Missed opportunities: 2011-present

Despite the circumstances of her departure, Goodloe-Johnson's tenure received mixed reviews overall. While she had clearly grossly failed to discharge her financial oversight responsibilities, she had also for the first time brought the potential for level of accountability for student success that communities and families of color had been seeking at least since 2001, when the Seattle Chapter of the NAACP threatened suit over the "achievement gap" (and in reality even further back, to the Seattle School Boycott of 1966 and earlier).

Significantly, while the changes had started before her time, her tenure had also seen a major erosion of the key elements of Stanford's system of autonomous schools: open school choice and school-level control of budgets, curriculum, and instructional methods. While the effects of these changes were still in their infancy, all that officially remained of the structure built by Stanford and SEA's Roger Erskine in 1997 were Building Leadership Teams, whose sole remaining official responsibility was determining professional development plans for their schools. With the removal of almost all of the core components of school-based management, the need for the School Board to provide system-wide coherence through policy direction had become particularly acute.

However, in 2011 as in 2003, community anger at Goodloe-Johnson had led to the election of a new School Board majority more inclined to conceive of their relationship to the Superintendent as adversarial. (187) The early departure in 2012 of Goodloe-Johnson's successor, interim superintendent Susan Enfield, was strongly rumored to be connected to School Board "micromanagement." (188) Shortly after her departure, the Board minority proposed a policy that would implement decades of recommendations and reorient the Board to "focus on district wide policy and avoid interfering in day-to-day school operations." (189) They met with resistance and limited success. (190)

At the national level, 2012 also saw a groundbreaking strike by the Chicago Teachers' Union that marked the beginning of a shift away from the national education reform movement's narrow emphasis on school accountability for student outcomes, to a much greater emphasis on factors external to schools, such as poverty, structural racism and housing insecurity. (191) This shift, which was part of a larger nationwide social justice movement focused on addressing long-standing racial inequities, also made itself felt in Seattle, and that same year saw the School Board approve Policy 0030, *Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity*.

187 "School Board may see agenda change," The Seattle Times, December 8, 2011

188 "High Tension for School Board," Cascade PBS, January 25, 2012

189 "Proposal sparks debate on school-board power," The Seattle Times, January 25, 2012

190 "School Board tables proposal about its power," The Seattle Times, January 26, 2012

Policy 0030 affirmed that “it is the right of every student to have an equitable educational experience,” and that this would require “differentiating resource allocation, within budgetary limitations, to meet the needs of students.”

It directed the use of eight specific operational strategies, including equitable access programming, effective professional development, authentic partnerships with families and outside organizations, creating multiple pathways for student success, and honoring student heritage in materials and assessments. While it did not set out specific goals for student success, the Policy did launch a coordinated effort to align District operations to racial equity as a guiding operating principle.



Chicago Teacher's Union strike in 2012,
Courtesy: Micah Uetricht

Subsequent Superintendent strategic plans, in 2013 and 2018, did include explicit and measurable goals related to racial and educational equity. Goal #1 in the 2013-18 plan was “Ensuring Educational Excellence and Equity for EVERY Student” via specific targeted strategies. (192) The 2018-24 plan committed the District to “actively becoming an anti-racist educational system” which would “eliminate opportunity gaps and [...] ensure every student will receive a high-quality, world-class education.” It outlined three related goals: third grade reading proficiency, improved school climates, and “culturally responsive profession practice and instruction,” to be addressed within a framework of “targeted universalism.” (193)

The Seattle Education Association has been an active partner in this process, often leading the charge to build equitable practices into the work of the District. From 2015 onward, the SPS-SEA partnership that had been part of the Collective Bargaining Agreement since 2004 (194) has included specific commitments by two parties to jointly address racially disproportionate discipline and “disproportionality in student learning.” Because the concept of school-level autonomy is still embedded in the CBA via Article IIA(4), this has mainly taken the form of creating an opportunity for selected schools to create building-level Racial Equity Teams to determine what that work should look like at the site level. (195)

This partnership, and the District's commitment in successive strategic plans to the goal of equitable access to educational excellence, provided a powerful central organizing principle, and the following years saw progress on multiple fronts. These included work toward district-wide implementation of an evidence-based framework of student academic and behavioral supports, a reduction in racially disproportionate discipline, and the creation of an African American Male Achievement initiative modeled on elements of the “My Brother's Keeper” program originated by the Oakland (CA) Unified School District.

191 “BCG's Big Bang: The 2012 Chicago Teachers Union Strike,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, September 14, 2022

192 Seattle Public Schools, *2013-2018 Strategic Plan*

193 Seattle Public Schools, *Strategic Plan 2018-24: Seattle Excellence*

194 Article II, originally titled *Site-Based Decision Making* and then *Partnership for Closing the Achievement Gap* (in 2004), was renamed *Partnership for Closing the Opportunity Gap* in 2018, and since 2019 has been titled *Partnership for Ensuring Racial and Educational Equity*.

195 *Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools And Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees, 2015-2018*, Article II, Section 1

However, the movement toward coherence has been uneven and marked by frequent setbacks. While the Covid-19 emergency beginning in 2020 has been extraordinarily disruptive, this unevenness was evident long prior to that time. For example, the success of the rollout of a consistent districtwide system of student supports has been largely determined by widely varying degrees of willingness by individual schools to engage in implementation work.(196) In addition, it has not been clear that central administration has sufficient internal coordination or capacity support even willing schools to implement the program or related initiatives. (197)

The evidence suggests that while there have been significant increases districtwide coherence since the Strategic Plan of 2008, the District is still struggling to overcome some of the core problems identified in external report (and by internal stakeholders) since 2003:



The Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA) logo, courtesy SPS

A continuing presumption of autonomous, market-based schools. Multiple recent audits of District operations make clear that despite efforts since 2003 to bring organizational coherence to Seattle Public Schools, presumptions of decentralized decision-making and school-level autonomy persist:

- By design, the District is decentralized, with most decision-making occurring at the building level. As a result, the District has a wide variety of schools, educational approaches, programs, and services [...] District operations are largely decentralized, with many decisions deferred to building staff according to Board policies and collective bargaining agreements. (198)
- SPS is geographically and operationally decentralized. SPS offers such a rich array of program options and strong neighborhood schools that the culture or personality of individual schools and programs may eclipse that of the district as a whole. (199)

While its core elements - including school-level control of budgets and curriculum, and open school choice - have been removed or significantly eroded, the persistence of CBA language reserving major operational decisions to schools has continually reinforced the presumption of school-level autonomy. The open question of where in the organization authority to make specific decisions lies remains unresolved, giving rise to continual negotiation over decision-making authority between the central administration and school staff that distracts from the core work of educating students.

196 *Evaluation of School-Based MTSS Implementation and Tiered Central Office Supports for "School of Promise,"* Seattle Public Schools Research & Evaluation Department, October 2019

197 Moss Adams, *Efficiency Study: Teaching and Learning Division, Final Report for Seattle Public Schools*, at 22-23; Novak Consulting, *Comprehensive MTSS Needs Assessment Prepared for Seattle Public Schools*, 2024

198 Moss Adams, id (2018), at 2

199 National School Public Relations Association, *Communication Audit Report: Seattle Public Schools*, 2023

This phenomenon iterates to the school level, where the intentional absence of explicit division of decision-making authority between the principal and union-represented staff in Article II of the CBA often also results in continual negotiation and renegotiation of control within a building, sometimes at the expense of focusing on student learning. The “principal as CEO” model lingers in both organizational culture and popular understanding, despite principals having little direct control over the elements of school site administration that would in fact allow them to act as chief executive officer.

At the same time, principals are evaluated based on how well they perform this CEO role for which they are no longer equipped (if, indeed, they ever were). The presumption that an empowered principalship is a reality leads central office staff to mostly adopt a hands-off, laissez-faire approach to principal support. Principals are often expected to “figure it out” for themselves, and may be given little directive in how to translate various central directives or even legal requirements to their buildings. As a result, central support for principals tends to be reactive rather than proactive.

This dynamic is exacerbated in many instances by a similar cultural persistence in the role assigned to families under the “system of market-based schools” implemented by Stanford and Olchefske. That system positioned families as customers in an open marketplace whose product was not subject to any appreciable level of quality control. In the absence of any District role in assuring universal school quality, it has been left to individual families to perform the diligent, thorough research and self-advocacy required to determine the quality and fitness of particular schools and to have their children educated at those that identify as adequate.

Relations between the District and families were deprioritized in the original model in favor of the development of consumer relationships between families and specific schools, and the District’s orientation toward families was that of *caveat emptor*. The model actively encouraged wide operational diversity among schools in response to microlocal conditions⁽²⁰⁰⁾, so it was appropriate for schools to be customer-focused and responsive to those consumers who expected (and demanded) more, or for things to be run differently. Since the beginning, families have been consistently encouraged to bring additional resources to their individual schools where possible for the purpose of molding its offerings to their expectations. ⁽²⁰¹⁾

The result has been a system that encourages a consumerist orientation toward schooling. ⁽²⁰²⁾ This, along with the “100 plus separate school systems” created by the school-based management model, has led to a situation in which many families have no awareness of their particular school’s connection to a larger system and how conditions at their own school may directly impact those at another school, or vice versa. Even where there is such awareness, the market-based schools model motivates those families who accept their assigned consumer role (whether unwittingly or willingly) to see other families and students primarily as competitors for scarce resources. ⁽²⁰³⁾

200 Stanford, id at 163-164

201 Author interview with former Superintendent Joseph Olchefske, December 15, 2022; PDK 318

202 See Labaree, “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals,” *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), 39-81.

203 National School Public Relations Association, id at 31

This fragmentation is also often reflected in staff expectations of site independence that create inherent resistance at the building level to attempts by the central administration to implement district wide initiatives for the benefit of students. The resistance is by no means universal, but it is widespread, and its absence in individual cases is dependent on the receptivity of specific adults rather than durable structures or a strong organizational commitment to prioritizing student need. The associated expectation that families will perform the role of consumers further decenters students and their needs and interests in favor of those of adults.

Unresolved central office coherence and capacity issues. Continued school-level resistance to central administrative direction is not solely due to a sentimental or political attachment to school-based management, and it does not imply that school staff are uninterested in student welfare. It largely stems rather from a lack of consistent central emphasis on student issues and a rational assessment of central administrative capacity to support schools in implementing district wide improvement directives. As early as 1990, weaknesses in the District's ability to coherently support schools in implementing improvement initiatives for the benefit of students were abundantly clear:

The District's overall organization and management structure suffers from three fundamental problems: it does not support a coherent strategic focus; it does not operationalize plans nor ensure accountability for results; and it does not initiate, or evaluate programs as an integrated portfolio [...] As a result, the substantial resources - and competent staff - of the District are not focused on meeting the needs of Seattle's students as effectively as possible. (204)

As far back as 2002, observers noted that schools were not inherently resistant to central directives: when they were provided with “the resources to implement directives and some choice in shaping their own approach, they were usually willing to comply.” However, in the absence of such resources, “the schools saw the district's demands [...] as an unfunded mandate.”(205) The Stanford-Olchefske approach, which required schools themselves to act entrepreneurially in locating resources with minimal central support, continued a pattern identified in 1990:

In its passivity, this relatively laissez-faire approach has created opportunities that permit entrepreneurs to develop new programs, in some cases rather successfully. However, at its root, such entrepreneurship occurs in spite of, rather than because of, the District's leadership.(206)

That this disconnect between central administration and schools persists to this day is evident in these 2023 comments by school staff: (207)

204 Cresap, id at IV-1

205 Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2005), id at 83

206 Cresap, id at IV-4

207 National School Public Relations Association (2023), id at 23

“District leadership seems to be disconnected from the issues that face educators daily.”

“I feel the district is very disconnected from what is really going on in the schools.”

“There is zero effort to ask educators or students what they need from their educational system and every centrally-pushed plan seems very out of place and misdirected.”

This disconnection in turn, appears to reflect a lack of internal coherence between departments within the central administration:

The District has a siloed operational environment, with limited centralization that could identify redundancies and opportunities to improve efficiency. [.. [P]erformance management, reporting, and communications practices are significant areas with fragmented or undocumented processes that impact [central administrative] efficiency. (208)

“[T]he various departments do not seem to be working together, especially when major changes are being rolled out to the staff. While the individual people that make up the district leadership team may have good intentions, the system itself seems to always be struggling to work smoothly.” (209)

This situation appears insoluble, despite the continuing efforts of talented and dedicated individuals to address it, in large part because of an even higher-level failure: that of successive School Boards to provide clear direction regarding system expectations to the Superintendent in the form of policy. In the absence of such direction, there is no unifying principle or set of principles that can provide guidance for decision making throughout the organization and thus coherence to operations. In turn, in the absence of guidance and in the presence of role confusion between Board and management, the role of Superintendent becomes untenable, leading to frequent changes in leadership.

A school board that has never consistently performed its governance role. In 1990, auditors identified weak School Board governance as the greatest obstacle improvement in Seattle Public Schools:

Among the major conclusions of this study is that governance is the central problem to be addressed if the District is to function effectively.(210)

It urged the School Board to “completely restructure its operations [...] to provide vision, direction, and leadership to the Seattle schools”:

This means establishing a policy framework; ensuring the effectiveness of plans, goals, and expectations; selecting a competent chief executive; ensuring an efficiently functioning top-management team; and providing overall direction, monitoring, and accountability for principal instructional and noninstructional management areas.

208 Moss Adams (2018), id at 23

209 National School Public Relations Association (2023), id at 23

210 Cresap, id at III-1

In the 30-year period that followed, outside observers repeatedly identified the continuance of weak governance as the single obstacle whose removal was essential to removing all other obstacles to improvement:

- Academic excellence and long-term fiscal stability can only be achieved with cohesive Board and executive team that can articulate a clear vision for the District and focus the organization's activities around academic achievement. [...] We recommend the School Board more clearly define its roles and responsibility through the [...] adoption of a governance model such as the Carver Policy Governance model or a comparable board governance model. (211)
- The auditors were told that a sense of urgency exists in the minds of district leadership; barriers that exist to the learning of every child must be removed. The efficacy of the recommendations contained in this audit rest on a viable, valid comprehensive, and focused board policy framework. Of all the requisite conditions necessary to put into place for an improved curriculum management system in the Seattle Public Schools, this one piece is fundamental. (212)
- The District should strive to develop a cohesive culture, which requires strong executive-level collaboration guided by a comprehensive strategic plan that defines outcome-based goals and objectives that are clearly linked to department operating plans. [...] Evolution to a true policy governance model with clearly defined roles and responsibilities will help improve [...] efficiency by allowing staff to focus their effort on strategies and plans that align with Board-established direction. (213)

A “Catch-22” phenomenon has perpetuated this situation: the presumed autonomy of schools, in the absence of a systemwide quality control mechanism, leaves their “customers” with nowhere to turn when problems cannot be resolved. This incentivizes elected officials to act as a combination of ombuds and attorneys in an attempt to gain attention and redress for the otherwise unresolvable complaints of individuals and groups.

This in turn leads to a strong reluctance on the part of some Board members to relinquish management and operational considerations to those in charge of management and operations, leaving a gaping vacuum where strong policy direction should be working to align operations to community values around educational quality. It also diverts elected officials from their role as representative of the entire community of Seattle, and deprives all but those with political connections, or whose interests coincide with those of specific directors, of effective representation. It perpetuates an unstable, “winner-take-all” environment for the School Board's work.

School Board directors who approach their role in such a manner are not acting irrationally. They are responding to real and compelling incentives created by the persistence for almost 30 years of a concept of educational management predicated on the orthodox application of free market principles to public education. These principles have created a system in which historical commitments to adult values of individualism and consumerism in public education are continually prioritized over the interests of students.

211 Community Advisory Committee for Investing in Educational Excellence (2006), id at 11-12

212 International Curriculum Management Audit Center, Phi Delta Kappa International (2007), id at 358

213 Moss Adams (2018), id at 20

As so many audits and reviews of Seattle Public Schools since 1990 have shown, no single “fix” can address what ails this District. Unless the community comes together to address the multiple factors that have led to this point - including contractually-guaranteed school autonomy, lack of role clarity throughout the organization, underdeveloped central administrative coherence and leadership capacity, an intractable policy governance vacuum, and the expectation that families will act as self-interested consumers of education for their children - success for all students, but especially for the most vulnerable, will continue to be left to chance.

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