

Realize the Dream: Quality Education is a Civil Right

Recommendations for Education Policymakers

Foreword

In this report, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (LCCREF) blends policy recommendations and “best practices” to create a clear picture of how well-run education programs can inform policy making; and how wise policies can encourage the spread of effective education reforms. With an emphasis on programs that are delivering high-quality education in low-income and high-minority districts, especially in math, science, and technology, LCCREF has illustrated how basic principles of education reform are being carried out by successful schools, districts, after-school programs, teacher training and recruitment programs, and through school financing and legal reforms.

No single policy recommendation or idea can create a successful school or ensure real and meaningful access to educational opportunity. The programs described in this report share certain features. Most importantly, they rely on strong, energetic, and committed leadership that filters down to create a supportive and nurturing environment. Successful school districts have dedicated superintendents who empower their principals. Successful principals recruit quality teachers and ensure that they have the resources and support they need to focus their energy on the students; and serve as an inspiration for parents whose own school experiences may have not been positive. Successful after-school and teacher training programs rely on committed and visionary leaders who inspire their staffs and the community.

As the focus on the crisis in American public education increases, national and state political leadership must rise to the occasion. We can be encouraged that a growing number of committed young people stand ready to take on the daunting challenge of bringing educational opportunity to children, families, and communities mired in poverty. They’re coming from all fields – law, business, social and physical sciences – to teach at and to start new schools; and they are inspiring others to join them. For their initiative and leadership to thrive, policymakers and advocates – regardless of their political parties or philosophy – must join together to support and encourage them.

The test of national leadership in ensuring quality education for all in the 21st century may be the most important test of all.

William L. Taylor
Chair, LCCREF Board of Directors

Table of Contents

Ensuring Adequate Funding and Facilities

1. *Schools need adequate funding.*
2. *Schools need cutting-edge facilities -- especially in science, math, and technology.*

Fostering Academic Achievement and Accountability

3. *All students must participate in a rigorous academic curriculum.*
4. *Academic goals must be clearly defined and accurately measured.*
5. *Schools should be held accountable for failure and recognized for success.*
6. *The best teachers must be matched with the neediest students.*
7. *Schools must work in close partnership with early education and post-secondary programs.*
8. *All students must have high quality supplemental academic programs and challenging after-school opportunities.*

Expanding Social, Developmental, and Health Supports

9. *Schools must offer adequate social, developmental, and health supports.*
10. *Schools must have high expectations for all their students.*

Encouraging Strong Leadership and Community Partnerships

11. *Communities must encourage and support strong school leaders.*
12. *Teachers must have high quality training and professional development opportunities, especially in math, science, and technology.*
13. *Schools must effectively engage parents and communities in children's academic achievement.*

Ensuring Adequate Funding and Facilities

Adequate funding and facilities are a universal and consistently overlooked pre-requisite for academic success. While designing equitable school financing measures is no easy task, even the most promising education reform policies cannot succeed unless schools have the financial capacity and appropriate facilities to get the job done.

1. Schools need adequate funding.

Ensuring a quality education requires providing resources to children based on their educational needs, not where they live. Federal funding provides only a small part of the total education budget – approximately 8 percent. The rest is equally split between state and local funding. Almost all local funding is from property taxes. That means that affluent communities with high property values have much more money available for education spending.

Federal and state policies should ensure that students in poor and predominately minority districts are provided with the same high quality education available to their more affluent peers. Helping children to achieve comparable levels of academic success starts with equalizing funding, but often must go further. In high need communities, schools need budgets that are large enough to provide supplemental services that can even the playing field for traditionally underserved students.

In some states, the debate on how to equalize the educational outcomes of all students has resulted in a series of “adequacy lawsuits” – court cases that challenge states’ compliance with their own state constitutional mandates to provide an adequate education. In these cases, the definition of adequacy is grounded in the stark contrast between of the “haves” of students in affluent school districts to the “have nots” of poor, predominantly minority districts.

- In New Jersey, the Education Law Center, a non-profit advocacy group turned to the courts to demand equal attention and funding to some of the state’s poorest, urban districts. To make their case, advocates provided concrete evidence of educational neglect in urban districts, from substantially lower graduation rates to crumbling buildings, less-qualified teachers, and technology labs full of second-hand equipment. In response, the New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the state to equalize per pupil spending between poor and affluent districts. The Court also ordered the state to take comprehensive action to address the other disadvantages facing children in poorer districts. This included providing additional state money for a fund to upgrade or replace inadequate school buildings and providing universal pre-kindergarten programs and after-school programs.
- In New York, the American Institutes for Research and Management Analysis and Planning, Inc., two nationally-known research organizations, conducted a statewide study that began with an analysis of the programs and services in the state’s best public schools to determine how much it would cost to provide those same services to students in every school district. By assembling groups of frontline educators, researchers were able to ask

specific questions about the materials, curriculum, and facilities that administrators and teachers need most, and then “cost out” what it would take to provide these supports for children in less affluent communities.

2. *Schools need cutting-edge facilities -- especially in science, math, and technology.*

Decaying school buildings and antiquated facilities send children the unmistakable message that education is not a priority and neither are they. Even with the best teachers and the most rigorous academic standards, students cannot succeed without facilities that foster learning. Buildings must be safe, comfortable and modern. Science and computer labs must offer the most up-to-date equipment. Schools must also provide well-designed spaces for arts, sports and other extra-curricular activities. Instead of classrooms in overcrowded trailers and drafty gymnasiums, schools must offer permanent, thoughtfully designed learning spaces that maximize individual attention and group learning experiences for all students.

- One prime example of a school that designed its space around the academic needs of its students is The Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High in San Diego. Based on a 1996 study that called for school design and academic reform based on personalization, connection to the adult world and a common intellectual mission, the school has set the standard for a 21st Century educational environment. In addition to classrooms that feature the latest technological innovations, High Tech High has also designed its work areas and common spaces to support learning through teamwork, group projects and presentations, and consistent integration of math, science, and technology.
- Appropriate design and modern facilities are also an essential component of academic success at the George I. Sanchez Charter High School, an institution based in two of Texas poorest school districts, Houston and San Antonio. Under the direction of the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans, the school campuses are specifically designed to meet the academic and personal needs of highly at-risk students who are most likely to drop out of school. In addition to the latest science and technology labs, Sanchez’s Houston campus has built a range of on-site facilities to provide students the supports they need to stay in school. These include a full-service medical clinic, comprehensive child care facilities for teen parents, and two live-in shelters – one for homeless youth and another for students with substance abuse issues.

Fostering Academic Achievement and Accountability

Schools cannot ensure a quality education for all students unless they are able to determine and measure what success looks like and be held accountable for academic outcomes. In addition to clear measures designed to track and improve the academic success of individual students, comprehensive research is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of small and large-scale programs.

3. *All students must participate in a rigorous academic curriculum.*

In affluent suburban districts and low-income urban areas, academically high-performing schools have one thing in common: a consistently rigorous curriculum. Requiring that all students participate in high-level coursework is an important signal that the school believes that all students have the ability to learn and succeed. While some critics have argued that a challenging curriculum will leave underperforming students behind, schools that have raised the academic bar -- and provided students with the supports they need to meet these expectations -- report a significant increase in academic achievement and an overall reduction in the number of school drop-outs.

- When the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) decided to raise academic standards, its School Board took the bold step of requiring all its graduating high school students to complete the University of California system’s academic entrance requirements. Despite fears that more stringent standards would push out academically vulnerable students, the District’s evaluation data showed the exact opposite: specific academic improvements and higher overall graduation rates, especially among Latino students.

To help close the achievement gap in math and science, SJUSD paid particular attention to improving high level course access for Latino and other minority students. It eliminated remedial and advanced classes through the ninth grade so that all students received the same foundation for the core curriculum. In addition, it required Algebra as the entry level math course and eliminated “gut” courses like business math and physical science. By eliminating “tracking” (programs that divide students into “gifted and talented” and underperforming groups) and removing the limits on participation AP coursework, SJUSD has succeeded in establishing high expectations and ensuring that all its graduates are adequately prepared for college.

4. *Academic goals must be clearly defined and accurately measured.*

From designing basic achievement tests to increasing graduation rates for students at-risk, schools must lay out clear standards for academic success and ensure that all their systems are aligned around helping all students reach those goals. This is especially important for children in special education programs, English-language learners and other students who may need an extra layer of supports to succeed.

In addition to clear standards, schools must have accurate ways to measure both individual academic achievement and the overall success of their programs. In today’s policy environment, the controversy surrounding testing standards has sometimes obscured the invaluable role that achievement testing and other evaluation data play in providing baseline information to close academic gaps. Quality research and evaluation are not only important for tracking student achievement, but also for assessing – and building public support for – an individual school or program.

- To encourage its most challenged schools to become a high-performing “School of Promise”, the Ohio state superintendent’s office sets out academic benchmarks that

exceed most state and federal guidelines. To qualify for the program, 75 percent or more of a school's total student body must be proficient in reading or math, including 75 percent of students in each of the following educationally at-risk groups: economically disadvantaged students and minority students. In addition to demonstrating two years of strong academic achievement, Schools of Promise must also graduate 73 percent or more of their students, a graduation rate that is significantly higher than the national average for other similarly-situated schools in disadvantaged communities across the country.

- In addition to complying with state and federal testing requirements, the San Jose Unified School District used frequent benchmark testing to generate regular data reports that allow school administrators and teachers to track how their students are performing, identify those students in need of extra academic or social supports, and re-evaluate the need for both immediate and long-term teaching adjustments.
- Teach for America (TFA), a national teacher recruitment and training organization, has effectively used the findings of an independent evaluation to identify its strengths as well as areas for program improvement. To increase the pool of talented teachers for children in the nation's low-income and minority communities, TFA recruits college seniors with strong academic records and leadership capabilities but without conventional teaching credentials.

In response to criticism that its new recruits were not being adequately prepared to teach students at-risk, TFA agreed to participate in an independent, randomized evaluation by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., a private research firm, to assess the impact of TFA teachers on student academic performance. The study found that TFA teachers had a more positive influence on math achievement than their non-TFA peers, and found TFA-trained and non-TFA teachers produced the same gains in reading. As a result of the study, TFA was able to directly refute the notion that its teachers were not adequately prepared to take on classroom challenges. In addition, TFA used the results of the evaluation to improve the literacy training program for its new teachers.

5. Schools should be held accountable for failure and recognized for success.

In the complex debate on how to design and enforce appropriate accountability measures for academic achievement, there is universal agreement on one fundamental principle: schools must be held responsible for the educational outcomes of their students. At a basic level, accountability requires schools to gather sufficient information to identify, measure, and eliminate barriers to academic achievement, especially for those children in poor and predominantly minority communities. In addition, schools must have clear mechanisms in place to share this data with the community and the media to ensure that they are adequately serving the needs of all children. Finally, policymakers and education leaders must be careful to create accountability measures that ensure compliance without causing further harm to the very students they are designed to support.

- In addition to holding schools, school administrators and teachers accountable for education gaps, it is important to publicly recognize schools for their students' academic

success and create new forums in which to share their most promising practices with other communities. The Ohio Schools of Promise Program was started to recognize the schools in economically disadvantaged communities that are succeeding despite the odds. While the main goal of the program was to encourage these high-performing schools to continue their successful efforts on behalf of the state's neediest students, it has a secondary benefit as well: the identification of promising practices that can be shared with other traditionally underserved school districts at the state and national level.

6. *The best teachers must be matched with the neediest students*

In too many poor and minority school districts, the students who need the most individual attention and academic help are often assigned to the most inexperienced and lowest-performing teachers. Through a combination of financial incentives, training, and professional development opportunities, schools, districts, and states must find new ways to encourage their most gifted and experienced teachers to help the students who will benefit most from their skills.

- To help raise teaching standards across the board, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has created a voluntary national system to certify teachers who meet high and rigorous standards for what “accomplished teachers should know and be able to do.” Several of NBPTS’s initiatives are particularly focused on increasing the number of minority teachers who have the opportunity to complete the program. In addition to its Direct Recruitment Efforts to Attract Minorities (DREAM) Team Initiative and its Targeted High Needs Initiative (THNI), a project that targets 20 urban and rural sites for increased participation in the NBPTS certification process, NBPTS has also supported efforts in several states to create financial incentives for teachers who commit to teach in some of the neediest school districts.
- Teach for America (TFA) is a national teacher recruitment organization whose mission is to recruit and train highly motivated new teachers to help close the achievement gap afflicting low-income and minority students in urban and rural schools. The TFA process starts with intensive recruitment efforts at the nation’s top colleges and universities that focus particular attention on attracting math and science majors and people of color. TFA then provides the recruits with intensive training and places the new teachers in high-need urban and rural districts across the country. For the 2004-05 school year, TFA placed more than 3,500 teachers in 22 districts.

7. *Schools must work in close partnership with early education and post-secondary programs.*

Over the past two decades, researchers have learned more than ever before about the importance of quality child care and early education opportunities to ensure that all children start school ready to learn and succeed academically. Despite the success of Early Head Start, Head Start and other promising early learning models, these programs are currently not available to all eligible children, especially to those in lower-income and minority communities. As a result, many children start school at a fundamental disadvantage to their more privileged peers.

Increasingly, however, schools are establishing closer partnerships with pre-k programs in their community to make sure their future students are getting the foundation they need.

Similarly, high school students need targeted supports and supplemental programs that not only prepare them for college, but maximize their opportunities to attend and graduate from college. Effective education policies, especially those that focus specifically on elementary or secondary school reforms, can only succeed if all students have quality early education opportunities and the transitional supports they need to make college a reality.

- Recognizing that the achievement gap for many low-income and minority students begins even before they reach elementary school, the New Jersey Supreme Court in the *Abbott* decision specifically required universal, high-quality preschool education for every three- and four-year-old child in New Jersey. In particular, the court required the use of an age-appropriate pre-school curriculum that was carefully linked to existing K-12 standards and a maximum class size of 15. District-supervised programs were also required to meet the needs of local communities and rely on local community providers who are “capable and willing” to meet these high standards.
- The George I. Sanchez Charter School in Texas also recognizes the fundamental need for quality early education by offering its teen parents free child care and pre-k education services for children between the ages of 6 months and four years. In addition to eliminating one of the main barriers that keep young parents from finishing high school, the school’s inclusion of early learning supports represents a targeted effort to build a more solid educational foundation for its next generation of students.
- In the San Jose Unified School District, for example, all of the high schools have implemented a broad range of student supports to help maximize student learning. To fill in specific gaps in its existing services, SJUSD offers Saturday Academies, summer “bridge” programs and educational partnerships with local community colleges to supplement learning. “The reality is that a college preparatory curriculum dramatically increases the number of students who are ready to go to college,” says former SJUSD superintendent Linda Murray. “The challenge now is to make college a reality for everyone who is ready.”
- In partnership with the Gates Foundation and the National Council of La Raza, the George I. Sanchez charter school offers an innovative Early College Program (ECP). Designed to bridge the gap between high school and college and enhance minority student opportunities, ECP allows participating students to leave with a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree or two years of college credit towards a bachelor’s degree. With the support of the Houston Tech Center and the Latino Technology Network, students at the San Antonio campus can take advantage of Houston’s state-of-the-art Odyssey Lab by using videoconferencing technology that also allows faculty to coordinate tutoring and other supplemental services that help improve students’ college chances, especially in the areas of math and science.

8. All students must have high quality supplemental academic programs and challenging after-school opportunities.

To succeed academically, all children should have access to quality supplemental supports, including challenging after-school and summer programs, tutoring, and mentoring opportunities. Supplemental academic programs and after-school opportunities are a proven way to reach at-risk youth by improving both self-confidence and academic achievement, particularly in poor and minority communities in which students may need extra supports to overcome years of inadequate funding and resources.

- Higher Achievement is a promising example of an intensive, supplemental academic program designed to prepare low-income and minority middle school students to go to competitive high schools and on to college. Unlike after-school programs that provide one or two specific activities to engage students, Higher Achievement is a comprehensive program that partners with existing public schools in the after-school hours to help underserved youth achieve academic excellence. Higher Achievement participants receive an additional 650 hours of academic instruction each year, including classes between 3 and 8 p.m. 3 days per week during the school year, a 40-hour per week summer academy, and a follow-through component that provides scholars with training and support to attend a high quality high school that will prepare them for college.

In addition to the direct services, Higher Achievement is also exploring new ways to replicate its program in other communities. In partnership with Columbia and Princeton Universities, Higher Achievement is in the process of conducting a randomized evaluation to identify the strengths of its program and help expand other students' opportunities to succeed academically.

Expanding Social, Developmental, and Health Supports

In traditionally underserved school districts, children need more than academic supports and high quality teaching to succeed. Students and their families must also be able to access an extra layer of social, developmental and health supports to create an adequate “learning baseline” for all students.

9. Schools must offer adequate social, developmental, and health supports.

In addition to a rigorous curriculum and supplemental academic supports, all children need basic social, developmental, health, and nutritional supports to provide a strong foundation for learning. An increasing number of high achieving schools in low-income and underserved minority communities are helping to improve their academic outcomes by increasing the array of counseling, support and health services available to students and their families.

By supporting the federal school breakfast and lunch programs, policymakers have long acknowledged the role that adequate, nutritious meals play in boosting children's ability to learn. In addition to nutritional supports, however, many schools are taking an even more aggressive

stance against obesity, diabetes and other health problems. With the support of parents and the local community, an increasing number of schools are attempting to eliminate vending machines that sell junk food, increase the range of healthy foods available in the school cafeteria, and cancel contracts with fast food franchises that provide unhealthy choices for school meals. In addition, some schools are restricting students' ability to leave the premises during school hours, partly to curb access to nearby fast food restaurants. Coupled with more targeted curricula on healthy eating and concrete strategies for educating students about the danger of obesity and related issues, some schools are giving their students a healthier foundation for academic success.

- The George I. Sanchez School has brought the provision of on-site “wraparound” services to a new level. On its Houston campus, the school offers a full service health clinic that provides pre-natal care, HIV and STD outreach and prevention services, parenting classes, immunizations, and other routine care. To support teen parents, the school offers free child care and pre-k education services for 60 children between the ages of 6 months and four years. In addition to gang intervention and other targeted prevention programs, the school also operates two shelters – one for homeless youth and the other for students with substance abuse issues.
- The Comer School Development Program (SDP), implemented in hundreds of schools across the country, is based on research suggesting that too many low-income and minority children enter school with significant developmental gaps that impair their ability to learn. To address these deficits, SDP uses basic child and adolescent developmental principles as the foundation for all aspects of school design, from organizational structure and classroom management to curriculum development and teaching. In sharp contrast to the pervasive “academic deficit theory” that has led to “tracking” and other lowered expectations for minority and lower-income students in some school districts, the Comer Process grounds academic success in a solid understanding of child development in several key areas: physical, psychological, language, social, ethical and cognitive. By integrating a child’s diverse developmental needs with underlying social supports, SDP has significantly improved the academic outcomes of its students.

10. *Schools must have high expectations for all their students.*

Even with adequate funding and facilities, children will not succeed unless the adults in their lives – teachers, parents, and school leaders – have high expectations for them and teach them that they can succeed. Some high-performing schools have accomplished this goal by providing students a more significant role or “voice” in school leadership and important decisions. Other schools are teaching students new ways to mediate their own disputes and establish greater control in their relationships with peers, parents, and teachers. Mentoring programs that encourage older students to help younger students have also been successful in getting both groups more invested in their academic futures.

- Ohio’s “Schools of Promise” have found that in addition to ambitious academic goals and standards-based instruction, students uniformly report that their opinions are valued and that they feel responsible for their academic success. Says Dr. Joseph Johnson, the former director of the Schools of Promise program, “in successful schools, children of all ages tell us that they are treated with respect and learning is fun – they feel like they belong.”
- The Comer School Development Program is another promising approach that encourages students to believe that they can succeed inside and outside the classroom. By learning the six “developmental pathways” – the developmental basis for academic learning and life – students are taught to identify what they need most from teachers and other children in their class and find constructive ways to make those needs known. The result is that students are taught to exercise control and responsibility for their own success and ensure that personal conflict does not impede academic learning.

Encouraging Strong Leadership and Community Partnerships

Successful education reform efforts must be implemented through creative leadership and the support of parents and members of the broader community. School leaders must receive the resources, training and moral support they need to help their students achieve academic success and invest all stakeholders in a common vision.

11. *Communities must encourage and support strong school leaders.*

Strong schools need strong leaders. To help all children achieve their full academic potential, effective education reform proposals must provide school leaders at all levels with opportunities to learn the newest techniques to handle the complexities of running large institutions, especially in schools with students who face economic challenges. In addition, school leaders need the support of policymakers, school board members, teachers, parents, and the broader community to encourage them to take the necessary risks to develop effective new programs and strategies.

- As an outgrowth of its national program, the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) created the KIPP Foundation to give aspiring educational leaders the “freedom, facility, and funding” to open and run KIPP schools. The program’s design is based on the notion that the principals who run KIPP schools must function not only as experienced educators, but as CEOs of their own non-profit organizations. In addition to helping its leaders secure appropriate school facilities and loans, the Foundation offers a year-long program with extensive coursework at the University of California at Berkeley’s Haas School of Business as well as hands-on residencies at KIPP Schools and mentoring by other KIPP leaders. As an added benefit, the emphasis on leadership is passed on to KIPP students through leadership summits and other activities.

12. *Teachers must have high quality training and professional development opportunities, especially in math, science, and technology.*

In any community, high-performing schools must have good teachers; teachers who are highly trained professionals able to speak directly to the diverse interests, backgrounds, and learning styles of their students. To engage children in the most cutting-edge innovations, teachers must also be supported by comprehensive range of professional development opportunities and a work environment that supports a dynamic culture of collaboration. Moreover, instead of viewing professional development opportunities as a reward for the highest performing teachers, good policy must ensure that all teachers, especially in the rapidly changing fields of math, science, and technology, have the supports they need to increase their knowledge base, expand their career opportunities, and most important, inspire the students who need them most.

- Through a unique approach designed to “engage teachers to engage students,” the Institute for the Development of Education in Advanced Sciences (IDEAS) at Hofstra University supports science education by helping teachers to foster an everyday appreciation of science in the classroom. With an emphasis on experiential learning – teaching that relates scientific principles to the world outside of school – IDEAS seeks to promote student achievement in science as well as a long-term commitment to stay in school.

By assembling a lively intellectual community, advanced teaching workshops, and other professional development resources, IDEAS allows teachers to study their own teaching methods to maximize their impact. Through a comprehensive range of programs, IDEAS builds on its partnerships with state- and federally-funded programs to enhance the development of K-12 science teachers in poor and traditionally underserved minority communities. IDEAS also provides teachers with the chance to connect with Hofstra’s nationally-recognized researchers in the sciences, computer sciences, engineering, and education fields.

- The Merck Institute for Science Education (MISE) is an organization dedicated to deepening teachers’ substantive knowledge in science and related fields. In addition to its efforts to improve science achievement in poor and minority communities, MISE offers a range of professional development programs for district teachers, curriculum directors, and administrators. Peer Teacher Workshops, the Leader Teacher Institute, the Principals’ Institute, study groups, and the Merck Fellows Program are all designed to create a well-resourced, peer-led science community in the schools MISE serves. Recognizing that teachers require more than intellectual capital, MISE provides free books, periodicals, videotapes, and an array of other scientific learning materials. It has also established several comprehensive science resource centers that provide access to hundreds of curriculum modules and other hands-on materials to supplement classroom teaching.

13. *Schools must effectively engage parents and communities in children’s academic achievement.*

Engaging parents and the broader community in educational success for all students is an essential starting point for successful education policies. Unless there is a well-defined and consistent expectation of academic success at school, at home, and in the community, students cannot achieve their academic goals and community support for public schools will continue to erode. For schools to succeed, they must find new and compelling strategies to reach out to parents and develop common goals and expectations for their children’s academic futures.

- The Comer School Development Program helps students achieve academic success by building strong relationships among all school stakeholders. As an integral part of its leadership structure, Comer Schools rely on a planning and management team composed of parents, school administrators, teachers, and support staff to monitor student progress, recommend modifications in the curriculum, and respond to changing student needs. In this way, the program is grounded in the notion that all the adults who are important to children, especially parents, must recognize and accept their vital role in encouraging academic success.
- In Ohio, the state’s Schools of Promise have been uniformly successful in encouraging parents to share both the responsibility and credit for their children’s academic achievement. These high-performing schools have “figured out a way to connect deeply with parents,” explains former program director Dr. Joseph Johnson. “In some ways, they have created hope for parents where perhaps there wasn’t hope before.” These meaningful connections with parents require school leaders to develop a culture that consistently promotes a positive connection between school and the entire family – inside the classroom and beyond.
- In addition to successful parental engagement, schools must find new and effective ways to educate and invest the broader community in school reform efforts. When the San Jose Unified School District considered raising its academic standards, the district began its reform process by appealing to the public through community forums, stakeholder focus groups, and formal surveys. “In order to implement these reforms, every system in the organization had to be aligned around the common goal of getting all kids ready for college,” explains Linda Murray, SJUSD’s former Superintendent. “We needed to make sure that our stakeholders were with us before making such a bold move.”
- A well-designed public engagement strategy also played a vital role in the effort to determine the cost of an adequate education for every student in New York. To ensure public input into the methodology, goals and outcome of the study, researchers devoted the initial stages of the project to a series of public engagement meetings that gathered educators, taxpayer representatives, parents, legislators, and other stakeholders to share their views on how to achieve “adequacy” in the New York public schools. “The open public engagement meetings were a key part of our research,” says Dr. Jay Chambers, the AIR Senior Research Fellow who directed the study. “The reality is that determining adequacy is a technical and political process and maintaining public transparency is an important part of that.”

- Community mentoring programs are another way to build community commitment to schools, and do so while both teaching academics and demonstrating to children that adults value them and their education. Higher Achievement recruits hundreds of professionals from the Washington area to serve as mentors for their students. Higher Achievement mentors are trained to teach a unique and rigorous academic curriculum in either math, literature, or technology and commit one evening per week for the entire school year to serve as mentors and teachers for a small group of students – usually three or fewer.

Conclusion: Translating Promising Practices into Promising Policies

Ensuring that all children receive a quality public education is a daunting responsibility for policymakers – especially in an era when academic success no longer begins and ends with a high school diploma. To take full advantage of educational opportunities in the 21st Century, students must be provided the supports they need to graduate from high school, attend and graduate from college, and become fully competitive in the national and global economies.

Unfortunately, there is no “one-size-fits-all” blueprint for effective education reform, particularly in poor and traditionally underserved minority communities where policymakers must constantly balance the merits of new initiatives with the legacy of past inequalities. To move these issues forward, however, LCCREF offers this report’s examples of working education reforms and policy recommendations to support and spread them. The principles reflected in these programs are an essential first step in helping policymakers determine whether education policy really passes the test for children, schools, and communities.