



On the Way to

Lawrence Hardy

“W

orld-class” has a nice ring to it, but what does it really mean?

Often, school districts use those words to highlight their aspirations, vowing in a vision or mission statement to become “a world-class school district” by some future date. It’s a promise that connotes a certain resolve and a realization that today’s students must achieve at unprecedented levels to compete in the global economy. But

defining just what “world-class” is—what a world-class school system looks like, how it’s organized, what its teachers teach and its students learn—that’s a lot more difficult.

A year ago, the McKinsey & Company consulting firm released a groundbreaking report, *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, that not only defined world-class in terms of national K-12 systems, but gauged where 17 countries with improving school systems stood on a continuum that ranged in quality from “poor” to “great.” The districts came from developed and developing countries on five different continents, and their levels of progress were similarly varied.

The U.S. wasn’t included but, somewhat incongruously, three of its school systems were. One was California’s Long Beach Unified School District, a mid-sized urban system that has moved from “fair” to “good” in less than 10 years and is well on its way to “great.” (The other two U.S. districts, which also rose from “fair” to “good,” were California’s Aspire charters and the Boston Public Schools.)

“England, Latvia, Lithuania,” reads the partial list of districts that had moved into the “good” range, according to McKinsey’s

California’s Long Beach Unified has earned national recognition for how it helps students achieve. How does this data-focused school system overcome the obstacles that face many urban districts?



(Photos, left to right) 1. A math coach watches a middle school math instructor teach a class. 2. Math coach Kyoko Weber-Sickler models a lesson. 3. Weber-Sickler works with a student. 4. Something is definitely “clicking” in Long Beach. 5. This middle school math teacher’s sense of humor helps Long Beach contend with severe budget cuts.

global rating. “Slovenia, Poland, Long Beach. ...”

Why Long Beach? What is it about California’s third-largest district—one still dwarfed in size by Los Angeles Unified to the north—that qualifies it to be measured against the very best in the world?

Driven by data

If anything, Long Beach is aggressively data-driven. It tests students frequently, not because of an intrinsic love of testing or sorting, but to glean information that can drive student, teacher, and district performance, says Superintendent Christopher Steinhauser. And the district’s performance over the last two decades—as well as the improvement it has posted year to year—has been remarkable.

That’s why, in addition to being chosen for McKinsey’s global report, it is visited regularly by educators from all over the world.

Many suburban districts excel with upper-income students: Urbanized Long Beach does it with a free and reduced-price lunch population of 72 percent. Seventy-nine percent of its students graduate in four years, and 74 percent of those go on to two- or four-year colleges or to other postsecondary studies. Last year, black students graduated at a remarkable 73 percent rate, and their dropout rate was 40 percent below the African-American average for the state, according to the Silicon Valley Education Foundation. Hispanics, which had a graduation rate

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of 75 percent, had the most students of any racial or ethnic group in Advanced Placement classes.

The Washington Post ranked eight Long Beach high schools as among the best in the nation in 2010. All outperformed 93 percent of schools nationwide in terms of their effectiveness at preparing students for college. The previous year, the district was studied by the Business-Higher Education Forum, a consortium of education and foundation leaders and Fortune 500 CEOs, which cited the district’s Seamless Education Partnership as a model for other communities. Launched in 1994, the partnership unites local businesses and the two nearby colleges—California State University, Long Beach; and Long Beach City College—in a communitywide effort to improve education outcomes and job preparedness.

That Long Beach has done all this in a state mired in seemingly perpetual economic crisis, its political system marked by mistrust and epic dysfunction, its public sector starved for funds, says a lot about the quality of local leaders and their ability to put aside petty differences and see the big picture.

“It’s very connected,” school board President Felton Williams says of the city, dubbed “Iowa by the Sea” in the 1950s because of the large number of families that moved there from that farm state and other areas of the Midwest. “And I think its connectedness says a lot about its ability to get things done, and its culture.”

Not ‘flavor of the month’

Iowa by the Sea doesn’t look much like it did demographically in those years. In addition to the district’s growing population of Hispanic students (52 percent), African American students make up 17 percent, and Asians about 16 percent. The district also has one of the largest populations of Cambodians outside of Southeast Asia.

Despite demographic and other changes, that unassuming Midwestern culture still persists.

“We don’t tend to do flashy ‘flavor of the month’ programs,” says Steinhauser, who graduated from the Long Beach schools and has worked in the district since he was a high school volunteer.

In fact, it does just the opposite. Long Beach has a multitude of programs to serve its largely disadvantaged population, and the list is impressive: the GEAR UP and AVID college preparatory programs; the Long Beach College Promise, which guarantees one semester’s tuition at Cal State Long Beach and Long Beach City College; and its latest effort to tie it all together, Linked Learning, which combines challenging academics, technical skills, work-based learning, and student supports such as tutoring, mentoring, and family assistance.

These programs aren’t simply layered upon one another. Each initiative, whether homegrown, like Linked Learning, or part of a state, federal, or foundation program, is carefully examined for how it will fit into the district’s comprehensive plan and rolled out over several years.

“We actually have turned down money from foundations because it’s not aligned with our plans,” Steinhauser says.

These kinds of programs—perhaps fine in other contexts

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but not right for Long Beach—are what Assistant Superintendent Robert Tagoda calls “random arrows,” and the district is vigilant about avoiding them.

“We are constantly looking at how we align our resources to our common goals and try to eliminate random arrows,” he says.

That means programs are constantly being reanalyzed, revised, expanded (or eliminated) based on the district’s needs. Talk to some of the middle-level administrators in Long Beach and you’ll often hear the word “iteration,” used to describe a certain phase of a program.

“One thing we’ve always done as a district—we’ve looked at data and at what’s working, what isn’t, and how we can make it better,” Steinhauser says. “It’s about consistency, it’s about alignment, it’s about building up.”

And also, he adds: “It should never be because of an individual. It should be a team approach.”

Informal professionalism

Visit Long Beach—the once-thriving, then declining, now resurgent port city—and you’ll sense a pervasive attitude of what you might call “informal professionalism.” Whether it’s because of the tight-knit ties in what one staffer called “a large urban, small-town district;” the enduring Iowa-by-the-Sea ethos that’s sometimes known as “the Long Beach Way;” or the considerable work the district and its corporate and institutional partners have put in over the years to build on previous successes; something is surely clicking.

Less than 20 years ago, the picture was much different. The naval shipyard that had provided the city with sustained employment opportunities was being phased out. Local defense contractors, including the massive McDonnell-Douglass, were downsizing. And in the course of less than five years, the city lost nearly 38,000 jobs.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the city was experiencing significant demographic changes. Whites were leaving; Hispanics and immigrants from Southeast Asia were moving in. There was ethnic and racial tension, crystallized in the public’s view by the 1992 riots in nearby Los Angeles following the acquittal of white police officers in the brutal beating of Rodney King.

City officials knew they needed to break the downward cycle. The same year of the Los Angeles riots, they formed the Long Beach Economic Partnership and funded a report entitled *A Call to Action*.

“While *A Call to Action* was centered on improvement for business, it also highlighted the importance of education as a ‘prerequisite to economic growth,’” according to the 2009 Business-Higher Education Forum report. “And it called on the school district, Long Beach City College, and Cal State Long Beach to build their own group, and the Long Beach Education

Partnership was founded.”

The following passage from the forum report is telling and offers a window into the thinking of the partnership’s players at the time, who grasped that they were in a rebuilding effort that would bind them together for the long term.

“A formal agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, never was developed in Long Beach because the group believed the continuous and open communication among the three institutions was essential and that it was not necessary to bind leaders to this commitment through paper.”

Steinhauser, who was then an area superintendent, recalls a meeting in 1994 with the business leaders.

“They basically took us on a three-day retreat,” he says. “We were going to design a world-class education system. We knew that businesses would never locate here unless we had a great school system.”

The board rallies

It has not always been easy. Even in Iowa by the Sea, as recently as five years ago there were periods of discord when reforms weren’t always met with support from the teachers unions or some members of the public. The school board’s response, according to board president Williams, was to rally around the superintendent publicly, to underscore that Steinhauser’s policies were *board* policies so he couldn’t be singled out as easily for attack.

“Basically,” Williams says, “if we all voted to approve it, how could they attack the superintendent for implementing it?”

Today, the challenge, overwhelmingly, is funding. Last year, because of state budget cuts, Long Beach was forced to lay off 1,000 staff members, about 180 from the district’s preschool program, and the rest at the K-12 level. In June, the school board approved cuts of about \$60 million on an operating budget of \$660 million.

“It’s very painful. It’s very sad,” Steinhauser says. “It’s just horrendous to see what our people have to go through. I see staff members—teachers—laid off, not for performance, by any means.”

The district, renowned for its commitment to staff development, has had to cut teaching coaching and increase class size.

“My greatest fear,” Steinhauser says, “is that this is the first group of kids we may not be able to serve as well as in the past because of the fiscal restraints that are in front of us.”

The budget challenge is, indeed, huge. But in all likelihood Long Beach will respond to this challenge in the same deliberate, focused manner it has applied to other obstacles it has faced during its now two-decade revival.

“One thing I appreciate about this school district—they celebrate,” says Williams. “And then they go back to work.” ■

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