Amidst the sea of failure that engulfs public education in urban areas throughout the United States, there is at least one school district that stands apart. While low test scores, high drop-out rates, violence, labor unrest and fiscal crises, are commonplace among many urban school districts, this has experienced steady improvements in the performance of its students and it has managed to respond effectively to many of the problems that are endemic to urban America.

The school district I am referring to is none other than San Francisco Unified, and it may be the only large, urban district in the country that has seen test scores, graduation rates, and a host of other achievement indicators rise consistently over the past five years.

Here is just a sample of some of the district's recent accomplishments: For the first time ever, reading and math scores have surpassed the national average (50th percentile) in 1996 and 1997; the high school graduation rate among seniors has increased to 90% (up from 82% in 1990) while the drop-out rate for students in 8th-12th grade has decreased from 18.3% in 1990 to 9.4% in 1996; the number of students performing in the top quartile on standardized tests has increased, while the number of students in the bottom quartile has declined significantly (In 1992 34% of students performed in bottom quartile for reading, in 1996 it was 27%. In math, 31% performed in bottom quartile in 1992, in 1996 it was 26%).

What is perhaps most important about the changes that have occurred during this five year period is that they have been accompanied by policy changes aimed at elevating academic standards for all students. At all high schools, graduation requirements have been increased so that all students are required to take more math, science and history than is mandated by the State of California. The number of units needed for graduation also has been increased from 220 in 1987 to 240 in 1997. More students than ever before are taking the SAT and applying to college after graduation, and the number of graduating seniors who are admitted to the University of California at Berkeley since 1990 has increased by 95%.

While the progress in student achievement in San Francisco may not seem significant when compared to many private and suburban public schools, these results stand out in dramatic contrast to the dismal performance of most urban school districts in the country. In Seattle and Washington D.C., former U.S. Army generals have been hired as
superintendents to bring strong leadership to floundering school districts, yet student performance remains largely unchanged. In Chicago the school district has been decentralized and in Baltimore and New Haven forms of privatization have been attempted, yet none of these has produced a change in past patterns. Even when states have taken the dramatic step of placing a wayward district under trusteeship as has occurred in Columbus, Ohio, Compton, California and several other cities throughout the country, little change has occurred.

In this era of reform and innovation during which more money from public and private sources is being spent on technology, "school restructuring" and various educational innovations than ever before, it is still largely the case that the performance of poor students in the inner-city is largely unchanged. At such schools drop-out rates remain high (generally over 25%), test scores are still low, and containing violence has replaced improving student achievement as the top educational priority. In most places these patterns are so persistent and enduring that they reinforce the notion that certain children, particularly those who are black, brown and poor, simply can not learn and achieve at the same level or pace of other children. In San Francisco this notion has not only been rejected through lofty rhetoric and platitudes, but through district policy and action.

What is the secret to educational success in San Francisco? Money is always a factor, and San Francisco has more of it than most urban districts in California, though substantially less than many of the urban districts on the east coast. With support from local corporations, a highly profitable revenue stream from leased property owned by the district, and a 90 million dollar bond initiative recently approved by the voters, the district hasn't been mired in the kind of nasty infighting that typically accompanies austerity and budget cutting. The availability of funds has prevented significant labor conflicts and made it possible for the district to open new schools in poor areas and provide additional resources to low performing schools.

But money is only a small part of the answer. Even more important than money is the climate of shared accountability that has been promoted by District Superintendent, Waldemar Rojas. With laser-like attentiveness, Rojas has focused district resources on strategies for improving student achievement, placing special emphasis on the needs of the poorest, and least prepared students. Students from the poorest parts of the city, Hunters Point, the Mission District and Western Addition, now attend two of the newer and more highly regarded high schools in the city.

Since his appointment in 1992, Rojas has ruffled more than a few feathers in his campaign to raise standards and improve student achievement. Under his leadership, shared accountability has literally included everyone: classroom teachers as well as district-level administrators, students as well as parents. However, holding people accountable for their part in the educational process hasn't been easy. As can be expected, opposition to some of the district's changes has emerged from a variety of sources. Primary among his opponents has been the United Educators of San Francisco which has taken a strong stand against his use of reconstitution as a strategy for reforming low performing schools. Under the plan, all personnel at the failing school, from the principal...
to the custodians, are reassigned to another school within the district, though some are asked to return. For example, at Mission High School over 60% of the staff returned after the school was reconstituted.

Whether or not reconstitution has actually worked to improve school performance continues to be a hotly debated issue in the district, and evaluations of the schools that have been reconstituted have not yet been completed. There have recently been negotiations with the union to lessen some of its more objectionable aspects of the strategy (e.g. wholesale dismissal of teachers), and it seems as though labor relations in the district may become more amicable in the coming year.

Opposition has also come from some of the parents of children who have traditionally been very successful academically. Fearing that the commitment to improving the performance of the neediest children will come at the expense of serving their children's needs, some of these parents have mounted concerted opposition to the superintendent's policies. This has occasionally been manifest as a racial issue, particularly at the prestigious Lowell High School, where some Asian parents have opposed admissions policies aimed at maintaining an ethnically diverse student body since this invariably means that fewer of their children gain access to the school. Attempts at compromise have been implemented but this issue and others like it continue to generate considerable controversy within the district.

Still, the focus on accountability at all levels, and improving student achievement remains. Unlike so many urban districts, excuses for failure, even those that have considerable validity, are not acceptable. Poverty, transience in residence, language and cultural differences, all of which effect large numbers of students in the district, are not regarded as valid excuses for academic failure. Even standardized tests, which many schools have rejected as indicators of performance due to cultural and linguistic bias, are embraced as benchmarks of change and progress in SFUSD.

In many of the most important respects, the San Francisco public schools are making real progress. These improvements are rooted in local initiative and leadership and not the by-product of state or federal reform policies. What they show is that tangible results in what matters most - student achievement - can be realized when commitment, leadership and resources are present and applied in a coordinated manner. More importantly, the relative success of San Francisco forces us to ask ourselves why similar results have not been achieved elsewhere, particularly in districts with more resources. It should also prompt us to demand much more than we presently receive from public education.

Published in In Motion Magazine October 6, 1997