Public Education Leadership Project
June 16, 2008
U.S. Public Education

- **Sector**
  - 15,000 districts; 100,000 schools; 50 million students
  - Over $450 billion annual expenditures; 100% increase in per pupil spending over 30 years, but performance is flat

- **Performance**
  - 4th grade students among top in math and science, but finish high school near bottom of industrialized countries
  - U.S. 10th among 30 OECD countries in percentage of students completing high school; 25th in mathematics
  - Low income and minority students 3 grades behind by age 9
  - Low income students 7 times less likely to graduate from college than middle class and affluent students
District Performance

- No high performing urban district in America today
- Excellent schools exist in struggling districts
- Outstanding classrooms exist in underperforming schools

Key Project Questions

- How does a district achieve excellent performance in every school and every classroom?
- How does a school district make best practice into common practice?
Challenging Conventional Wisdom

Performance of Urban School Districts

Current Performance Frontier

Zone of Unrealized Potential

Low

High

Theoretical Performance Limit

Funding Governance Policy Politics Union contracts

© PELP 2006, S. Childress and A. Grossman
Created three-year partnership among HBS, HGSE and nine urban school districts: 1.25 million students, 200,000 employees, $16 billion combined operating budgets

- Anne Arundel County Public Schools
- Boston Public Schools
- Charleston County Public Schools
- Chicago Public Schools
- Harrisburg School District
- Memphis City Schools
- Montgomery County Public Schools
- San Diego City Schools
- San Francisco Unified School District
Course development approach to knowledge generation:

- Visit districts to identify and understand challenges
- Develop theory
- Produce conceptual notes and cases
- Teach material on campus to test theory and provide learning opportunity for faculty
- Modify theory
- Repeat cycle
Popular Approaches to Scale

- Just run it like a business
- Schools are not businesses, more different than similar:
  - Capital flows
  - Labor markets
  - Customers
  - External forces
- Much more complex enterprises, therefore much harder to manage
Organizational Effectiveness Difficult to Achieve

- **Powerful forces opposite to market forces in business**
  - Multiple stakeholders with varied perception of success
  - Political entities exert conflicting pressures
  - Funding targeted at specific programs
  - Pressure to adopt latest “hot” ideas
  - Political decisions trump managerial decisions
  - Thirty month average urban superintendent tenure

- **Districts are often collection of programs unrelated to each other or strategy**

- **Challenges addressed individually leading to fragmentation of efforts**
Popular Approaches to Scale

- School-based approaches
  - Find great principals
  - Decentralize and push power to principals
  - Establish small schools
  - Create competitive markets—charters, vouchers, choice

- Individually and collectively school-based solutions produce some results but have not achieved scale

- In response, district attempts to standardize and centralize practices across the district

- Performance across schools remains variable
Achieving Excellence at Scale

- Create an integrated system that recognizes differences across schools while leveraging the power of the network as a whole:
  - Set district-wide strategy for improvement
  - Build entire organization as integrated system—HR, resource allocation, performance measurement, etc.
  - Focus on continuous improvement
  - Give schools autonomy to solve their performance problems and provide system-level supports
  - Enlist multi-stakeholder coalitions in the new vision
PELP Coherence Framework

Adapted from the Congruence Model developed by Michael Tushman and Charles O’Reilly
PELP Coherence Framework
Problem-solving Approach to Strategy

1. Identify and Analyze the Problem
2. Develop a Theory of Action
3. Design the Strategy
4. Plan for Implementation
5. Implement the Strategy
6. Assess Progress
7. Adapt and Modify for Continuous Improvement
PELP Coherence Framework

Adapted from the Congruence Model developed by Michael Tushman and Charles O’Reilly