

Harvard project on districts announced

The Boston Globe

Plan seeks to improve public school systems

By Anand Vaishnav, Globe Staff, 10/26/2003

The Harvard Business School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education announced a joint research project last week to study the academics and management of nine school districts across the country, hoping to break new ground in finding the best ways to turn around large public school systems.

Faculty and researchers at the two graduate schools will delve into nine school systems, including Boston, in an effort to help the districts revamp what they do administratively and educationally. The three-year project, which started with a \$3 million gift from Harvard Business School's class of 1963, will evaluate how the school districts link their operations and academics, which superintendents for years viewed as two problems to be addressed separately.

A common yearning among people inside and outside public education is the wish for large, often intractable school districts to run more efficiently like private businesses. But that ignores the reality of what public schools face daily, leaders of the project say.

"If you take existing lessons from the management of other sectors and simply apply them to public education, they tend not to work," said Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "In order to deal with school systems, you need to consider the political, the pedagogical, the governmental, the technical, the logistical, the legal -- all these different perspectives."

For example, Lagemann said, researchers could examine whether school systems' personnel offices -- which typically deal more with the red tape of hiring and firing of teachers -- can also tackle career development or employee advancement, areas often covered by private-sector personnel departments.

The multimillion-dollar effort is called the Public Education Leadership Project and will involve nine districts that enroll more than 1 million students: Boston; Anne Arundel County, Md.; Charleston, S.C.; Chicago; Harrisburg, Pa.; Minneapolis; Montgomery County, Md.; San Diego; and San Francisco.

Leaders of those school systems will spend a week at Harvard each summer beginning in 2004, while faculty evaluate district initiatives to advise whether they should be discarded or reshaped to reach the goal of improved student performance, measured by test scores and other means.

Other universities, such as Boston University, UCLA, and Stanford University, have attempted similar partnerships between their business and education graduate schools.

Boston public schools Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant said he is open to new ideas from the other school leaders as well as the Harvard professors.

"It's an opportunity to go in thinking that we'd be better off with the best practices that we can take from both the business school and the education school, and see where it suggests possible ways that we could improve," Payzant said.

© Copyright 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.

© Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company