

Urban Schools Group Leaves Imprint on K-12 Policy

Faces tests to its staying power

By [Denisa R. Superville](#)

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One of the most stalwart advocates for big-city school districts and a power player in federal education policy got its start 60 years ago as an ad hoc meeting of superintendents worried about prospects for graduates in cities where manufacturing jobs were dwindling.

That group—including superintendents from Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, and San Francisco—evolved into the [Council of the Great City Schools](#), the Washington-based advocacy organization that champions the interests of the country's 69 largest urban districts and Hawaii's statewide school system.

Along the way, the council became a formidable voice on behalf of urban districts, and has served as a forum for big-city school leaders to learn from one another. The group has left an imprint on major federal education legislation and policies, from Title I, which provides additional funds to high-poverty schools, to the federal E-rate program, which subsidizes telecommunications services for libraries and schools.

As the council enters its 60th year, it faces tests to its staying power.

The urban education landscape in many cities now includes expanding school choice such as charter schools and vouchers, and, in some cases, state-run school districts. A new federal education law is shifting decisionmaking authority to states, an arena where the council has held little sway. And the council's central mission—accelerating the pace of academic progress in schools filled mostly with low-income students of color—is as challenging as ever.

Supporters of the council say its role is even more important at this juncture.

"I couldn't do my job without the council," said Kaya Henderson, the outgoing chancellor of the District of Columbia school system who serves on the group's executive committee.

The Council of the Great City Schools: Key Moments

"Without the council, I wouldn't have the information that I need, I wouldn't have the network with other urban superintendents that I need, I wouldn't have the visibility."

The council often points to the District of Columbia as an exemplar of the strides that urban districts have made. Despite stubborn racial gaps in performance, the district is the fastest-improving urban school system in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as "the nation's report card."

Those results are proof to Michael Casserly, the council's executive director, that urban schools are getting better and the group's work is having an impact.

Collectively, though, urban school systems still trail the national average in performance on NAEP. And in districts that have improved, large gaps remain between black and Hispanic students and their white and Asian peers.

"I don't think anybody is satisfied with where we are," Casserly said. "But I do think that, as an organization, we've been instrumental in defining a vision for improvement, galvanizing the membership around that mission, and putting the tools in place to help them improve and then the measures to tell whether or not we have been effective."



The council convened the first national summit of big-city mayors and superintendents in Detroit. Executive Director Michael Casserly is at left.

—Council of The Great City Schools-File

Arne Duncan, who was the U.S. secretary of education from 2009 until late last year, said the council deserves credit for the improvements in urban school systems and for being willing to be held publicly accountable for results.

"I think they have worked with a level of courage and commitment to children and commitment to results that is, frankly, often rare in the education space," said Duncan, a former CEO of the Chicago district.

The districts that make up the council serve about 7.3 million students, 40 percent of whom are Hispanic, 29 percent African-American, and 20 percent white. Seventy percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of poverty.

Reach and Impact

Over time, the council has become well-respected for its knowledge of how urban systems work and a go-to source for lawmakers and others looking to test how education policies and proposals are likely to play out in big-city schools. The council's steady leadership from Casserly, the executive director since 1992, along with Jeff Simering, the legislative director since 1994, has helped bolster its reputation.

"What's unusual is the level of expertise that they bring to the table," said Vic Klatt, a lobbyist on K-12 issues. "They sweat the details in lots of ways that others don't."

The group is also bipartisan in nature, an advantage when working both sides of the aisle to secure as much money as it can for districts while pushing to avoid saddling them with more rules.



The council was a strong supporter of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal K-12 legislation that President George W. Bush signed into law and ushered in stronger accountability measures and a focus on disadvantaged students.

—Ron Edmonds/AP-File

The council has demonstrated time and again that its member districts were willing to subject themselves to more scrutiny. Its support for the annual testing requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act and the breakdown of testing results by demographic groups are some of the most prominent examples. But arguably its most important move was persuading urban districts to voluntarily have their students' performance on NAEP collected, analyzed, publicly reported, and compared with state-level results as part of the [Trial Urban District Assessment](#), or TUDA.

The council's deep research on issues and its ability to provide quick feedback from its member districts has made it an invaluable resource to congressional and Education Department staff members.

Michael Yudin, the former assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services in the Obama administration, said he relied on the council's knowledge when it came to understanding how new policies and programs would work in urban schools.

"We were always cognizant of their voice and their influence and their ability to help with implementation," Yudin said. "At the end of the day, can districts implement what we are trying to do? And that's the role that they played in helping us think through that."

"But the council's work to influence policy in Washington at times has drawn the ire of other groups that advocate for children.

The group opposed the Federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 because it feared it would impose untenable costs for districts. The council was joined in its opposition by other major K-12 organizations, but the stance put it at odds with health and wellness groups pushing for more-stringent nutrition standards in school meals. It has also been at odds with some civil rights organizations and disability groups over how to hold schools accountable for student performance and tackle the achievement gap.

Setting the Agenda?

Whether the council sets the K-12 agenda in Washington or is seen as a follower depends on the issue.

Duncan and others say it has been agenda-setting in delving into the education of [African-American and Latino boys](#) and examining the role of race and the persistence of racial disparities in schools. The council's initiatives around improving academic outcomes for black, Latino, and Native American boys, for example, predated President Barack Obama's [My Brother's Keeper](#) program by several years.



The council's pledge to improve opportunities for boys of color became part of President Obama's My Brother's Keeper initiative.

—J. Scott Applewhite/AP-File

When the debate began raging about too much testing in schools—giving rise to the parental "opt-out" movement—the council did an in-depth survey on testing in schools. The report, released last October, added hard numbers to a "largely evidence-free debate," Casserly said.

More to the point, the Obama administration released a set of principles to help districts cut back on the number of assessments—the very same day the council's report was released.

"I think we are really ahead on some of these national conversations," the District of Columbia's Henderson said.

But in the more recent debates around how to hold schools accountable for performance under the new Every Student Succeeds Act, the council, some observers said, was not among the prominent voices.

The council includes members of big-city school boards, and while much of its work focuses on influencing federal policy, it works directly with districts to improve all manner of their operations. The council deploys teams of experts to review such areas as curriculum, transportation, food services, and finances. And superintendents say they can rely on the organization's advice on a range of issues.

Working for Districts

The Tulsa, Okla., district, which joined the council last year, tapped its network of experts to review the district's instructional programs and adopted some of the recommendations in a new strategic plan, said Superintendent Deborah Gist. Still, some of the most intractable problems in urban districts persist—lagging graduation rates, overall low achievement in reading and math, and high teacher turnover, to name a few. Leadership churn—especially at the superintendent level—remains a stubborn problem. A council report in 2014 found that the average tenure for a big-city superintendent is 3.2 years.

John Deasy, a former Los Angeles Unified superintendent who was ousted by his board in 2014, said the council can't be blamed for leadership churn that sometimes results from school boards and superintendents pursuing different agendas and circumstances that are products of local environments.

The council has trained urban school boards in good governance, and the unique nature of its members, consisting of both school chiefs and school board members, means that both groups of leaders can work together and see issues from each other's point of view, Deasy said.



After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the council sent emergency facilities teams there to assess damage to school buildings.

—Bill Haber/AP-File

As for criticism of test scores in urban schools, superintendents said it's unfair to hold the council responsible. But Casserly said criticism about the rate of progress is valid.

"I think as an organization it's our responsibility to claim some ownership with where we are," he said.

As many of the challenges of educating children in poverty expand beyond urban districts to those in suburbs, the council faces questions about membership and who should be included in its ranks. In recent years, it has turned down applications from large school systems such as Maryland's Prince George's County and Washoe County, Nev., whose student populations mirror those of existing member districts but fell short on other criteria such as being in a city with a population of more than 250,000.

The council has started to invite those districts to meetings, but without full membership, they do not have access to the group's highly praised strategic-support teams.

On its core mission—improving academic achievement—the council will redouble efforts to improve overall instructional programs, turn around chronically underperforming schools, and focus on students who have always lagged behind their peers, including African-American boys, English-learners, and poor students.

"I don't see a fundamental shift in our priorities," Casserly said. "I see more an intensifying of the work."

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