

LAGGARDS



LEADERS

How Three States Found Their Way Forward

A Special Edition of
the *Leaders [&] Laggards* Series





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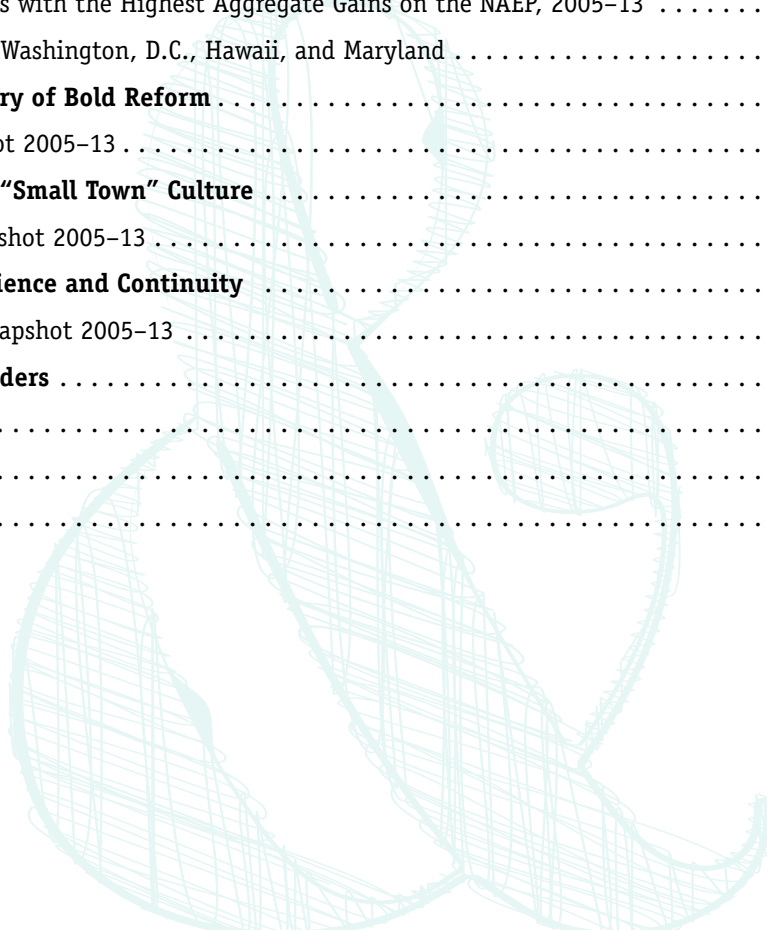
How Three States Found Their Way Forward

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[INTRODUCTION]

Nearly a decade ago, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce issued the first in an ongoing series of reports comparing state education performance. These reports, titled *Leaders & Laggards*, illuminated how states were faring on an array of K–12 and higher education measures. Perhaps most clearly, the reports highlighted just how far states had to go to achieve better results for student success, talent management, and the effective use of taxpayer funds.

At the same time, the reports made clear that some states have been making steady strides. In areas such as data management, states are doing much better than they were a decade ago. These results suggested that it might be useful to take a closer look at the states that have made improvement over time. The *Leaders & Laggards* reports have proven beneficial to the business community and education advocates at large, in some instances helping to flag new possibilities or overlooked realities for policymakers. At other times, they have served to rally support around measures of student success. Often—and as demonstrated in this edition—the business community has played a critical role in educational improvement, by providing civic leadership, encouraging employees to volunteer their time, providing financial support, or serving on advisory boards and local school boards. The reports have sought to foster public dialogue—and debate—on how to improve the educational experience for students across the nation. This report offers a chance to acknowledge progress and recognize the efforts of educators and state leaders who are making a difference. More important, such a study provides an opportunity for those elsewhere to gain a better understanding of what these states have done and how they've done it.

Determining which states have made the biggest gains poses a challenge, both because different states use different tests to measure student performance and because states change tests and test scoring over time. Simply comparing state test scores can reward states for adopting an easy test, setting a low bar, or otherwise manipulating

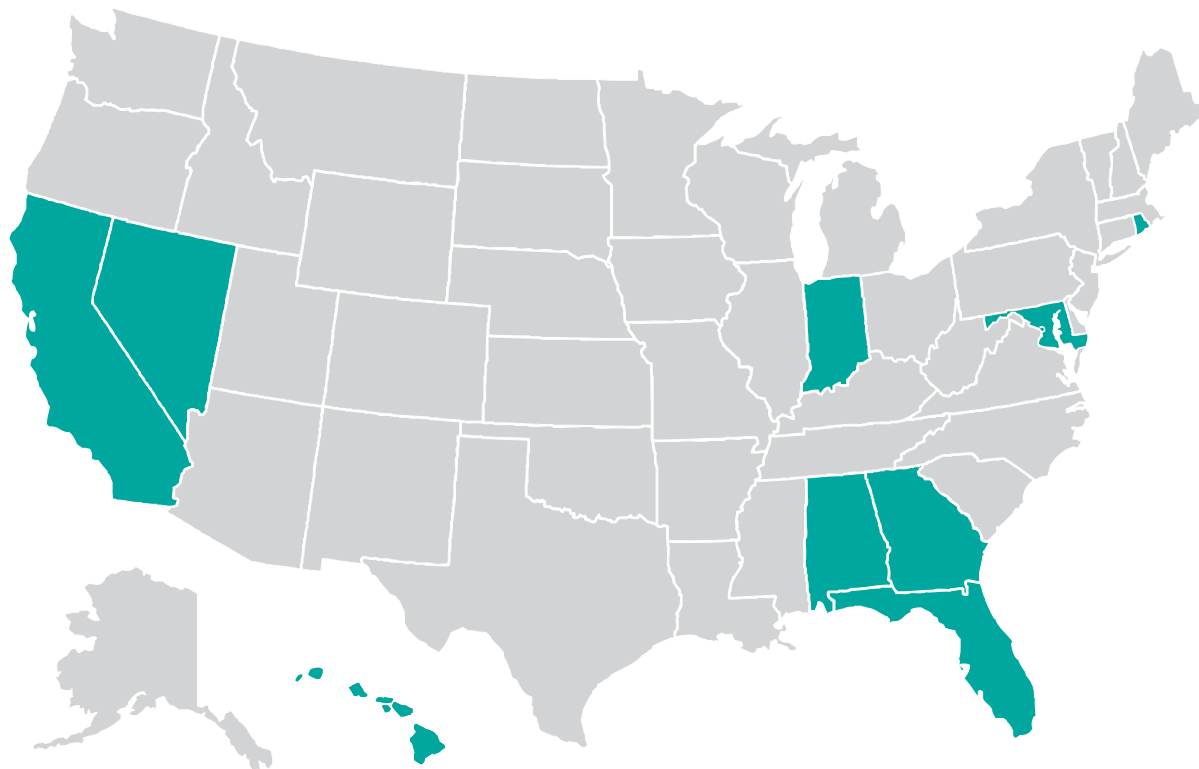
the results. Consequently, the sensible measure is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Known as the “nation’s report card,” the NAEP is administered every two years to a sample of students in every state in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The NAEP reading and math tests are widely treated as the one appropriate way to compare performance across states in reading and math. The NAEP has the added virtue of being distinct from state testing and accountability systems, making it a “low-stakes” test—one that neither schools nor educators have incentive to game.

The NAEP is hardly a perfect measure of educational quality. Reading and math performance are vital—but they encompass only a portion of what parents, communities, and business leaders expect from schools. More significantly, state performance is affected by many things other than classroom instruction. Shifts in demographics and economic circumstances can affect the results,¹ which means that part of any state’s achievement gains can typically be ascribed to population shifts. For this reason, we include detailed information on the demographics of the profiled states—allowing readers to see how significant a role population changes might have played.

Because the first *Leaders & Laggards* report used data from the 2005 NAEP, and the most recent used data from the 2013 NAEP, this analysis examines the states that made the largest gains in math and reading between 2005 and 2013. The gains are based on aggregate improvement in fourth- and eighth-grade statewide performance on the NAEP. This approach yielded the simplest and most straightforward measure of overall improvement during that span. To gauge performance, we simply combined the fourth- and eighth-grade gains. There are other, more sophisticated ways to generate such a ranking, but this approach proved the cleanest, most intuitive, and most obviously fair to all states for our purposes. Table 1 shows the results of that ranking.

Table 1: Top 10 States with the Highest Aggregate Gains on the NAEP, 2005–13

Rank	State	4th-Grade Reading	8th-Grade Reading	4th-Grade Math	8th-Grade Math	TOTAL Gain
1	District of Columbia	14.83	9.54	17.44	20.04	61.85
2	Hawaii	5.27	11.46	13.21	15.78	45.72
3	Maryland	12.03	13.02	6.75	8.71	40.51
4	Rhode Island	6.36	5.71	7.98	11.75	31.80
5	Alabama	10.82	5.45	7.79	6.98	31.04
6	Nevada	6.57	8.83	6.39	8.38	30.17
7	Georgia	7.41	7.74	6.41	6.99	28.55
8	Indiana	7.26	6.26	8.53	6.05	28.10
9	California	6.03	11.07	3.29	7.34	27.73
10	Florida	8.00	10.05	2.75	6.81	27.61







All of the states that made significant gains deserve note. But for the 2005–13 period, the top three states were Washington, D.C., Hawaii, and Maryland, in that order—and not by a small margin. A quick look at the table shows that Washington, D.C., laps the field, and that Hawaii and Maryland far outpace their closest competitors. After those top 3 states, rankings tighten up, with numbers 4 through 10 closely grouped. It’s also worth noting that the 2015 NAEP scores were recently released and that, while Washington, D.C., and Hawaii continue to lead the nation, Maryland suffered a precipitous drop. That decline has been ascribed in part to Maryland changing its testing policy to assess more students with special needs, though it’s unclear how much that change affected Maryland’s 2013–15 drop. Moreover, Maryland’s example offers two useful reminders: (1) observed trends can change direction and are inevitably more complicated than they may appear; and (2) the

results of the NAEP assessments are properly subject to the same concerns and cautions about tested populations and demographic shifts that can be raised when interpreting any set of test results.

In the pages ahead, we take a closer look at what happened in the three states that made the largest gains during 2005–13. The profiles offer a chance for key stakeholders in each state to discuss their state’s achievements and to offer their thoughts on what caused the gains. While the fruits of such an interview-driven approach should always be treated with an appropriate amount of caution, the degree of convergence in the explanations offered by key stakeholders is remarkable—and illuminating.

Table 2 offers a quick snapshot of the demographics and local conditions in the three leading states, as of 2014.*

Table 2: Snapshot of Washington, D.C., Hawaii, and Maryland

	 District of Columbia	 Hawaii	 Maryland	 U.S.
Population (2014)	658,893	1,419,561	5,976,407	318,857,056
Median Household Income (2014)	\$65,830	\$67,402	\$73,538	\$53,046
Per Pupil Spending (2013)	\$17,953	\$11,823	\$13,829	\$10,700
Adults with a B.A. (2014)	52.4%	30.1%	36.8%	28.8%
Persons in Poverty (2014)	17.7%	11.4%	10.1%	14.8%
Student Enrollment (2013)	76,140	184,670	859,638	49,941,900
Number of School Districts (2013)	1	1	24	13,515
Number of District Schools (2013)	128	254	1,397	92,738
Number of Charter Schools (2013)	102	32	52	6,079
Charter School Student Enrollment (2013)	41.7%	5.2%	2.2%	4.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics and Common Core of Data*. (*For consistency across states, we used the most recent federal data available at the time of publication.)

Washington, D.C., is treated as a 51st state for purposes of federal education policy and NAEP administration. It has its own State Education Agency (the Office of the Superintendent) while operating as a single school district. In 2005, Washington, D.C., had long been regarded as one of the nation's worst school districts. On the 2005 NAEP, just 10% of D.C.'s fourth graders and 7% of its eighth graders were proficient in math. Reading results weren't any better, with just 11% of D.C.'s fourth graders and 12% of its eighth graders performing at the proficient level.² The larger city was struggling as well, in terms of the economy, infrastructure, and public safety. Over the past decade, Washington, D.C., has seen a renaissance on many fronts. Its educational gains have been fueled by aggressive governance change, a bold reform agenda in the D.C. Public Schools, and a vibrant charter school sector.

Hawaii is another state long known for mediocre schools. Back in 2006, *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" report ranked Hawaii as 46th in the nation on NAEP performance.³ A small state with just 180,000 public school students and the highest share of private school enrollment in the nation, Hawaii features a unique demographic context. White, black, and Hispanic students combined account for only a modest share of the state's students, while two-thirds of students are classified as Asian or Pacific Islanders. Because the category Asian and Pacific Islanders includes many distinct ethnicities, questions of culture and subgroup performance are exceptionally complex in the Aloha State. Other than Washington, D.C., Hawaii is the only state organized as a single school district. Whereas D.C.'s tale is one of tough changes, however, Hawaii's is one of collaboration and of leveraging the unique strengths of a close-knit island culture.

Maryland, with 870,000 students across 24 districts, is yet another small state—though the largest of the three profiled here. Affluent and well educated, Maryland has long been regarded as a state that demands much of its schools.⁴ Building from its pioneering experience with standards-based accountability in the 1990s, Maryland was prepared to hit the ground running in the early innings of the No Child Left Behind era. With leadership stability provided for two decades by iconic state superintendent Nancy Grasmick and a culture of cooperation encompassing its two dozen districts, Maryland provides a model of

continuity and sustained focus. (Potentially noteworthy is that all Maryland's gains occurred before 2011. As noted above, the state's scores fell in 2013–15; they also declined in 2011–13, though not enough to outweigh the state's outsized gains between 2005 and 2011).

In talking with key stakeholders in D.C., Hawaii, and Maryland, three things become clear. One, in crucial ways, the states have followed very different paths to educational success. D.C.'s governance reforms, bold policy changes, and embrace of school choice are dramatically different from the path taken by Hawaii and Maryland. States with different cultures and political realities can pursue improvement in many ways. Two, there are also striking similarities across all three states—including smallness and cohesion; an emphasis on implementation; outsize funding increases paired with an emphasis on data, standards, and accountability; and a commitment to staying the course. Three, no one can confidently trace exactly what's responsible for his or her state's success. Thus, the insights in the pages ahead are nothing more (and nothing less) than the best thinking of well-positioned stakeholders. That's a caution that plenty of leaders from all three states would have readers keep in mind.

Laggards can become leaders. There's no simple or easy path to doing so, but these states show just how much is possible.

*** [WASHINGTON, D.C.: A STORY OF BOLD REFORM]

In 2005, Washington, D.C., had long been plagued by swaths of impoverished neighborhoods, troubled municipal governance, and one of the nation’s most dysfunctional school systems. In the past decade, however, D.C. has been one of the nation’s most impressive education turnaround stories. D.C. is unusual in that its success is the product of both dramatic improvement in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the contributions of an expansive charter school sector. Moreover, D.C. constitutes a single, modestly sized school district that today enjoys one of the nation’s most affluent and educated adult populations. As of 2015, D.C.’s single school district, DCPS, has an enrollment of 48,000, while another 38,000 students attend D.C. charter schools.⁵ The city has long spent heavily in education, though until the past decade it saw little return on that investment. In 2005, D.C. spent more than \$12,900 per pupil, compared with a national average of \$8,700. Between 2005 and 2013, D.C. grew per pupil spending by 38%, relative to a national norm of 23%. The result was that, by 2013, D.C.

was outspending the average state by a dramatic margin—by more than \$17,900 compared with \$10,700.⁶

Between 2005 and 2013, D.C. improved on the NAEP faster than any other state, which was remarkable given D.C.’s long-standing status as an educational embarrassment. In the 1990s and early 2000s, DCPS churned through a series of superintendents while suffering through any number of fiascos, including piles of textbooks rotting in warehouses, decrepit facilities, astounding special education backlogs, and persistent trouble just opening the schools on time. More than one local stakeholder described the schools from that period as a “national disgrace.” In 2004, Clifford Janey was named DCPS’s sixth superintendent in a decade. Observers wondered whether he could work with a contentious, divided school board to reform the troubled system. While Janey’s contributions included a set of rigorous academic standards and a master facilities plan, it would be his successor who would revolutionize DCPS.

Table 3: D.C. Snapshot 2005–13

	2004–05	2008–09	2012–13
Total State Population	567,754	580,236	635,040
Student Enrollment	76,714	68,681	76,140
Number of District Schools	175	140	128
Number of Charter Schools	40	90	102
Charter School Student Enrollment	18.3%	36.1%	43.2%
Total Teachers	5,387	5,321	5,925
Low-Income Students	66%	69.3%	61.6%
English-Language Learners	8%	9.9%	10.3%
Students with Disabilities	19.6%	N/A*	16.5%
African-American Students	84.5%	81.5%	74.6%

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	2004–05	2008–09	2012–13
Hispanic Students	9.5%	10.8%	13.9%
White Students	4.6%	6%	8.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander Students	1.4%	1.6%	1.4%
Per Pupil Spending (Nominal Dollars)	\$12,979	\$16,408	\$17,953
Median Family Income	\$43,451	\$55,590	\$65,246
Adults with a B.A.	45.7%	48.4%	53.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics and Common Core of Data.

*Data were not collected on the number of students with disabilities in the 2008–09 year.

Rebooting the System

The district’s education system started to change quickly in 2006, when former City Council member Adrian Fenty unseated two-term mayor Anthony Williams. At the time, the mayor’s power over the schools was limited, as the city’s 11-member Board of Education hired the superintendent and set education policy. In his first act as mayor, Fenty proposed putting schools and the budget directly under mayoral control. Approved in short order by the City Council and U.S. Congress, the D.C. Public Education Reform Amendment Act gave the mayor control of DCPS. It also gave the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board sole authority over charter schools (getting DCPS out of the charter school business) and created a new Office of the State Superintendent of Education—allowing the district to hand off paperwork and compliance obligations.

Fenty’s first order of business was to find a new chancellor. In summer 2007, he hired Michelle Rhee, founder of The New Teacher Project (TNTP) and a Teach For America alum. At the time, Fenty explained, “This system needs radical change; it really needs a shake-up ... We did not want to pick someone to tinker around the edges.” Former Deputy Mayor Victor Reinoso, who recruited Rhee, recalls, “I said to

her, ‘We have a strong mayor and are looking for someone who has the guts to go inside the belly of the beast and do what has to be done.’ Her eyes lit up.”

Rhee says, “At the time, being a superintendent was literally the last thing I wanted to do. Superintendents get blamed for everything and have the power to change nothing. I knew that because I’d been working in districts in my role at TNTP. But [Reinoso] ... sold me that Fenty was the real deal, education was his number one priority, and the chancellor would report directly to him.” Rhee recalls, “I knew that if I took the job, we couldn’t take an incremental, around-the-edge approach. D.C. was the most dysfunctional district in the country. When I met Fenty, I talked specifics. I said I wanted to reform collective bargaining agreements, do layoffs by quality ... He just said, ‘Makes sense, makes sense.’ He said it so quickly, I wondered if he understood how much pushback he would get and what was involved.” Rhee attended weekly senior leadership meetings and had a standing weekly one-on-one meeting with the mayor. As she moved forward, Rhee took care to build on Janey’s work wherever possible, especially on standards, curriculum, and facilities. She explains, “Anytime you can build on what’s there, you should. There’s no reason to re-create the wheel.”

In December 2008, the outspoken Rhee triggered a national media storm when she was featured on the cover of *TIME Magazine* holding a broomstick in order to personify the sweeping change she had brought to D.C. schools. Although the magazine celebrated her “no excuses” approach, her dramatic changes and brash style drew vocal opposition from the teachers union and some parents. Rhee’s reforms were blamed by many for Fenty’s loss to City Council Chairman Vincent Gray in his 2010 reelection bid. Rhee says she was caught off guard when Fenty lost. In short order, Rhee stepped aside, with Fenty and Gray agreeing that Rhee’s deputy and longtime colleague Kaya Henderson would carry on the effort. Henderson had deep roots in D.C., was known for a genial demeanor, and was well equipped to put a softer face on the D.C. reforms. Meanwhile, as chair of

the City Council, Gray had been instrumental in the passage of Fenty’s reforms and he supported Henderson’s push to continue the Rhee reforms. Gray says, “Mayoral control contributed mightily to our progress. It enabled a culture change in school decision making. The important thing was to focus on creating systems and reforms that always placed children at the top of the priority list.”

Gray was defeated by challenger Muriel Bowser in the 2014 Democratic primary, in an election where education did not play a major role. In a decision made easy due to Henderson’s popularity, Bowser elected to keep Henderson in place. As of late 2015, that meant the Rhee-Henderson reform agenda had continued for eight years under two chancellors and three mayors. As Henderson observes, “No

D.C. SUPERINTENDENTS



Clifford Janey was named superintendent by the D.C. Board of Education in 2004. Regarded more as a deliberate executive than a hard-charging figure, Janey arrived in D.C. after 21 years in the Boston Public Schools as a teacher and chief academic officer and 7 years as superintendent in Rochester, New York. In D.C., Janey adopted rigorous standards and developed a Master Education Plan that sketched a vision for a new curriculum and facilities. In 2007, Janey was replaced by Michelle Rhee—who made it a point to build on his Master Education Plan.

Michelle Rhee became chancellor of DCPS in 2007. An unorthodox choice for the superintendent, Rhee had no previous experience as a superintendent. She had spent three years teaching as a Teach For America corps member in Baltimore in the mid-1990s. She then went on to found the TFA spinoff organization The New Teacher Project to recruit and train teachers to serve in low-performing urban districts. As a Korean American, Rhee was the first non-black D.C. schools chief in nearly four decades. Rhee may have put D.C. on a path to success, but her reforms also stirred controversy. When Mayor Adrian Fenty lost his reelection bid 2010, Rhee stepped down as chancellor.

Kaya Henderson served as Rhee’s deputy chancellor before succeeding Rhee in 2010. Not one to seek the spotlight, she had long wryly insisted that she “liked being the number two.” Prior to joining DCPS, Henderson taught as a Teach For America corps member in the Bronx before becoming TFA’s director of admissions. She then went on to work closely with Rhee in launching The New Teacher Project. When Rhee became chancellor, Henderson was her first hire. When appointed by new mayor Vincent Gray to follow Rhee, Henderson determined that she needed to adopt a softer style than that employed by her predecessor. When Gray lost his mayoral reelection bid to Muriel Bowser in 2014, Bowser quickly announced she would be keeping Henderson on as chancellor.

matter what you read in the papers, all three mayors have wanted the same thing: school improvement. All of them have put resources behind it and trusted Michelle or me to make the decisions that we needed to make. I think that's very different than our predecessors."

Some stakeholders suggest that the turnover in the mayor's office may have actually helped reform to stick. One stakeholder muses, "The reform agenda got separated from individual personalities. In New York and Chicago, reform was linked with individual mayors; when they left, there was enormous blowback." Henderson comments, "We can't live in a world of constant destruction. People like tear-down stories. That's what sells in newspapers. But the papers don't tell about the painstaking work of earning trust. All the controversy was about setting the table to do the hard work of teaching and learning."

Putting Talent First

The Rhee-Henderson reforms rested on a multipronged effort to recruit, retain, reward, develop, and support talented teachers and school leaders. That meant cleaning house; revamping teacher contracts, evaluation, and pay; and launching new approaches to professional development and support. In retrospect, Henderson says, there were two distinct phases to reforming DCPS: "The first three years were really about putting systems and evaluations in place to tell teachers where they were and what they needed to do to be better. In 2010, we shifted to more of a focus on great educators, rigorous academics, and engaged students and families." As she puts it, the warmer and fuzzier second stage was always the goal, but the contentious first stage was necessary if the system was to make that pivot.

Reform started by changing norms in an organization where mediocrity had long been quietly accepted. Rhee's first move was to tackle DCPS's "broken bureaucracy." She explains, "In my experience doing this with low-performing districts or schools, one of the first things you have to do is start to shift the culture. We went about that by starting to hold adults accountable for the results we're producing for kids." Rhee says that central administration was an overstuffed mess, recalling that she would walk around the central office asking questions like, "How many students do we have?" and couldn't get a straight answer. Rhee

concluded that tackling the central office's dysfunction required making district staff at-will employees. Reinoso remembers, "We thought the mayor would have no interest in this fight, just because it would be politically foolhardy. But when Michelle told him she thought it was the right thing to do, all he said was, 'OK. Draft the bill.'" In March 2008, the City Council gave Rhee the authority to fire nonunion employees without cause.⁸ Rhee soon terminated 98 employees, reducing payroll by \$6 million. It was the first mass dismissal since the budget crisis of the late 1990s.

The housecleaning stretched from central administration down to the classroom. Rhee reached a controversial agreement with the Washington Teachers Union that allowed her to reassign teachers at 23 underenrolled schools she was set to close, rather than abiding strictly by seniority. She dismissed 24 DCPS principals, including half of the system's high school principals.⁹ In 2010, DCPS fired more than 200 teachers, mostly for failing to meet performance standards.¹⁰ Under Henderson, things continued apace. In 2011, DCPS fired more than 400 teachers for poor performance.¹¹

Even as Rhee launched her housecleaning efforts, DCPS moved to revamp the teacher contract and teacher pay. Jason Kamras, DCPS's chief of human capital since 2007, notes that a performance-based pay schedule was critical to attracting, recognizing, and retaining great teachers—and breathing life into Rhee's vision. In summer 2008, Rhee proposed a groundbreaking salary plan that would pay experienced teachers as much as \$130,000 annually but would change tenure. After a protracted back and forth, DCPS and the Washington Teachers Union negotiated a contract that allowed teachers to earn \$120,000 a year with just nine years of experience—in return for an end to traditional tenure protections. Today, DCPS teachers earn pay increases based on performance and whether they teach in a high-poverty school. Teachers with positive ratings can receive annual bonuses of up to \$25,000 and those with consecutive years of high performance can see their base pay grow by up to \$27,000.¹²

DCPS's pioneering teacher evaluation system, known as IMPACT, sought to clarify expectations and provide feedback and support. It serves as the backbone for the system's efforts to raise expectations and recruit and reward talented

performers. Ratings are based on student achievement, instructional expertise, collaboration, and professionalism. Based on the evaluations, teachers are labeled as highly effective, effective, developing, minimally effective, or ineffective. Teacher ratings are used to make decisions about retention and to determine pay increases. Teachers who are labeled as ineffective for one year, minimally effective for two years, or developing for three years are subject to termination. In 2014–15, 35% of teachers were rated highly effective while 21% received ratings that would put them at risk of termination. The district reviews the IMPACT data regularly, much like any other high-performing organization—but in a fashion that’s exceptional in K–12 schooling. Scott Thompson, deputy chief of human capital for teacher effectiveness at DCPS, observes, “Implementation is often the difference between success and failure. A lot of places have evaluation systems that look similar to ours on paper. The difference is that we pay as much attention to the details of implementation as we pay to design. We have a team of people who work full time, and are extraordinarily detail oriented, to make sure that every aspect of IMPACT is operationalized at as high a level of quality and fidelity as possible. It’s easy to underestimate how much that matters.”

Kamras says that IMPACT enables DCPS to better recognize outstanding teachers: “One of the best things we’ve ever done is to say thank you and ask, ‘Will you stay?’ to our best teachers. We literally send a letter that says, ‘Thank you for all that you do, we hope that you stay, and is there anything we can do.’ We sent that to a few hundred teachers who were rated as highly effective. An unbelievable number told us that it meant so much; that they’d never been acknowledged before.” DCPS has partnered with the D.C. Public Education Fund to honor great teachers, holding an annual Academy Awards–type gala where honorees are awarded eye-popping cash bonuses. Scott Thompson talks about DCPS’s Leadership Initiative For Teachers (LIFT)—which serves as a five-stage career ladder for DCPS teachers by providing “opportunities for advancement without leaving the classroom, as well as increased recognition and compensation.” He says, “We talked with hundreds of our teachers about how they saw their careers in the profession. We heard from many that they felt there were no opportunities for advancement that didn’t require them to leave the classroom.” So the system created a kind of

“college course catalog” that compiled dozens of leadership opportunities teachers could pursue. He continues, “We also send out a newsletter every other week, which highlights upcoming opportunities and profiles teachers who have participated in exciting programs. It has a 52% open rate—higher than just about anything else we send out. LIFT’s success didn’t depend on creating expensive new programs—just better informing our teachers about the opportunities available to them at each stage of their careers.”

The Charter School Revolution

In Washington, D.C., the massive overhaul of the traditional district is only part of the story. Far and away, D.C. is the “state” with the largest share of students attending charter schools, other than New Orleans. In 2013–14, 44% of public school students attended charter schools.¹³ Meanwhile, as impressive as DCPS gains have been on the NAEP, those posted by D.C.’s charter sector have been equally impressive. When one factors in the federally funded D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program—a school voucher program that serves several thousand students—D.C. is one of the nation’s leading hotbeds of school choice. The federal School Reform Act brought charter schooling to D.C. in 1995, and D.C.’s first charter school opened in 1996. Historically regarded as a strong law, D.C.’s charter law has provided room for substantial growth, an independent charter board as an authorizer, substantial autonomy, and accountability.¹⁴ Originally, D.C. charter schools could be authorized by either DCPS or D.C.’s Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB), but DCPCSB was granted sole authorizing power in 2007.

During its first decade, notes Scott Pearson, executive director of DCPCSB, D.C. authorizing tended to reflect a “let a thousand flowers bloom mentality.” He says, “That led to uneven quality, even as some of our best homegrown schools—like KIPP D.C., D.C. Prep, Thurgood Marshall Academy—got started during that time.” By 2008, D.C. had one of the largest charter systems in the country, with 92 campuses accounting for more than one-third of the city’s public school enrollment. Meanwhile, DCPCSB took on an increasingly active role. Before 2010, only three D.C. charter schools had their charters revoked for academic quality. But, starting in 2008, foundations supported DCPCSB’s effort to create a performance management framework to

track factors like charter school enrollment, attendance, discipline rates, and truancy, as well as academic performance. When the performance framework was rolled out in 2011, about 20 schools were underperforming. Four years later, reports Pearson, all but two of those have either improved their performance or been closed.

D.C.'s rapid charter growth was due in large part to extensive local support. Kevin Chavous, a former City Council education chair and champion of school choice in D.C., says that D.C. charter schooling's roots were "organic,"

which explains why there was less rancor than in cities like New Orleans. He says, "There was lots of word of mouth and a comfort level with the idea in the public housing community. I know because I was there. As a City Council member, I'd go to public housing—I had 10 projects in my ward—and I'd hear the conversations: 'They'll keep them after school? They'll feed them?' This word of mouth fed into an idea of 'I want that too.'" He continues, "When people want to start a charter, I'm surprised how many think the last thing they'll do is talk to the neighbors and community—it's an afterthought. We couldn't have done it

ADDRESSING A DYSFUNCTIONAL SYSTEM

When Rhee started as D.C.'s chancellor, she says, "Even though NCLB [No Child Left Behind] was in place and you had an accountability system where there were consequences for not performing up to par, there really didn't seem to be any real awareness of it. The federal accountability system hadn't seeped into the psyche of school leaders." Rhee began to conference with each principal to set goals and look at the previous year's achievement. She describes one instance in which a particular principal's prior year's results were abysmal, with less than 20% of her school proficient. Rhee asked where to set the next year's goal and the principal said it should be 50%. When Rhee asked how she planned to get there, Rhee recalls the principal's answer was, "We're going to pray." Rhee says, "That sort of thing was common."

In DCPS, basic blocking and tackling was necessary to create a functioning system. Henderson says, "When we came in, we knew central office needed to support schools and not the other way around. When we arrived, we didn't find the system here to be in place to help us do that. Central office had 29 different data systems. Even before we started working on what schools needed to do differently, we needed to pull back the things that were driving schools crazy. It was simple things: like moving to a single daily email to principals, instead of bombarding them with several emails a day."

DCPS had operated under a series of court orders on special education, imposed by frustrated judges appalled at the district's inability to manage caseloads or provide basic services. The result was the district spending more than \$100 million a year to put special education students in costly private school placements. In 2007, Rhee set about reforming specialized education. Nathaniel Beers, pediatrician and chief of specialized instruction, says, "From 2007 to 2011, the focus was on compliance. D.C. had not been able to do simple things. They couldn't even host an IEP [Individualized Education Plan] meeting with the right eight people in the room or on the correct timeline. No one seemed to have clarity on what was required when." The new administration shut down ineffective programs while halving the 1,500 students in private placements—a move that better serves students, reduces the frustrations for families, and saves the city \$80 million a year.

Today, Henderson says, "You can't underestimate the role that data has played. We're now looking at kid-level data—saying that if you don't know the kid by name and where they are, you aren't doing it right. We know who kids are and what they need."

in D.C. without the church leaders. We had strong pastoral support from the black clergy and that made a huge difference.”

Pearson, like others, credits the success of D.C.’s charters, in large part, to a web of local support. He says, “You can’t tell the story of charter success here without talking about the incredible ecosystem. There are multiple advocacy organizations. NewSchools [Venture Fund] is here. Congress gives the city \$15 million a year just to dispense to charter schools, as part of the three-sector construction of the Opportunity Scholarship program. It’s almost easier to point to the ed[ucation] nonprofits that aren’t here than the ones that are. There are more than 50 college access organizations in the city. That whole network really provides a lot of support for our schools.”

D.C. is also marked by a relatively cordial dynamic between DCPS and charter schools. In the early years of charter schooling, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, observers recall more tension between DCPS and charter schools—especially during an era when DCPS was losing student population numbers. Reinoso observes, “One of the things that has made D.C. different is that enrollment is rising in charter schools and in DCPS. That both have been growing has mitigated some of the tension and noise you see elsewhere.” Kamras speaks for many in DCPS when he says, “We’ve had a healthy competition with charter schools from the start. At the end of the day, we all just want kids to get a great education. If that’s in a charter school, that’s great.” Today, DCPS and the charter community have merged their school enrollment fairs, and Pearson tells of Henderson personally reaching out to him on his first day in his new job.

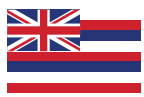
Conclusion

D.C.’s story is one of bold change and continuity working in tandem. After a decade of leadership by three mayors and three strong chancellors, the results suggest a once-troubled city is making giant strides in the right direction. One key stakeholder observes, “There’s a psychic notion around education reform in the city. People are operating with a different sense of urgency. When people across the city are talking about education, when the mayor’s top issues are education, when the most exciting committee

on D.C. City Council is education, it creates a pressure—it keeps the urgency front and center.” This urgency and the emphasis on putting data to use are evident in even a cursory conversation with D.C. school leaders. A telling illustration was an exchange with Abdullah Zaki, principal of Dunbar High School, who recalled—to the decimal place—changes in annual performance a few years ago at a *previous* school.

D.C. enjoyed several structural advantages that leaders took advantage of—some may be replicable in other contexts, others may not. For one, DCPS leadership did not have to negotiate with the teachers union on teacher evaluation because Congress gave DCPS sole authority over the issue in the 1990s. For another, the “state” of D.C. consists of just one school district. While Fenty’s reforms took care to create a “state education agency” separate from DCPS, the coordination problems are minimal—meaning that the DCPS leadership can make adjustments to policies on a rapid basis and with a fair degree of precision. Finally, D.C. enjoys a vibrant charter sector that holds up examples of success, creating urgency and room for district leadership to become more involved.

D.C. serves as a lesson in how tough-minded, controversial reforms can set the table for softer-edged, lasting improvement. Henderson says, “One of the things people misunderstand is the conflict. The tearing down isn’t for its own sake. Firing people and closing schools, just doing those things doesn’t mean you get good results.” The point, Henderson says, is that these tough decisions have made it possible for the system to focus on curriculum, literacy, and other elements of schooling. “All the time and effort we’ve spent on this is the story not told.”



[HAWAII: THE POWER OF A “SMALL TOWN” CULTURE]

Hawaii is repeatedly described by key stakeholders as a small town. Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi says, “It’s a state of small towns. And like small towns, it’s very relationship based.” Adding to the small-town feel is Hawaii’s tiny size, island vibe, and status as the only state that is organized as a single school district (aside from D.C.). Hawaii’s isolation from the mainland has a real impact on the culture and on approaches to reform. As Donald Young, the dean of the University of Hawaii’s School of Education, points out, “We’re the only university for 2,500 miles.” As Tammi Chun, assistant superintendent at the Hawaii Department of Education puts it, “We knew that we would not be able to easily attract teachers or leaders across district or state borders because of our geographic isolation. We knew that human capital challenge of having great teachers and leaders was going to be addressed within, by working together and developing our own people.” Hawaii has also enjoyed exceptional leadership stability, with only two superintendents between 2001 and 2015.

Hawaii’s schools were long regarded as mediocre, making its outsized NAEP gains especially noteworthy. As one key stakeholder recalls, “Back in the early 2000s, we were so low. We were low on everything. We were low on NAEP and on the pipeline reports that higher education put out. We would often see Hawaii ranked in the nation’s bottom five. We used to think, ‘Thank goodness for D.C.!’ because D.C. was typically behind us. So we had a sense of urgency for our students and state.” Between 2005 and 2013, Hawaii boosted nominal per pupil spending by 31%, compared with a national average of 23%. In 2005, Hawaii spent a few hundred dollars a year more than the national average. By 2013, Hawaii was spending more than \$11,800 per pupil, compared with a national average of \$10,700.¹⁵ With those funds, Hawaii managed to fuel a remarkably sustained, and remarkably low-key, improvement in NAEP performance. How Hawaii made that happen is the question.

HAWAII SUPERINTENDENTS



Pat Hamamoto was named state superintendent in 2001, after serving former superintendent Paul LeMahieu as deputy. A veteran Hawaiian educator and administrator, Hamamoto had been charged with working to fix the state’s broken special education system and has credited gains on that front as one of her earliest achievements.¹⁶ Hamamoto helped craft Act 51, the 2004 law that dramatically increased school autonomy. She pushed to increase the use of data and the rigor of Hawaii’s standards. She is particularly remembered for launching Hawaii’s ambitious push on standards-based reform. In 2009, after wrestling with a year’s worth of budget cuts and politically charged teacher furlough negotiations, Hamamoto resigned her post and passed the baton on to her deputy.

Kathryn Matayoshi was named superintendent in 2010 when the state Department of Education was grappling with severe budget cuts.¹⁷ Matayoshi led Hawaii’s implementation of Common Core standards across the state and reorganized the department around a set of strategic goals focused on student success. Matayoshi came to the education world by a circuitous route. Never an educator, she began her career as attorney and later served in numerous positions in the private, government, and nonprofit sectors. Immediately before arriving at the Department of Education, she was the executive director of the Hawaii Business Roundtable.¹⁸ She explains that those experiences helped teach her about the role of partnerships and how to collaborate with all of Hawaii’s stakeholders.

Table 4: Hawaii Snapshot 2005–13

	2004–05	2008–09	2012–13
Total State Population	1,273,569	1,332,213	1,392,766
Student Enrollment	183,185	179,478	184,760
Number of District Schools	258	259	254
Number of Charter Schools	27	31	32
Charter School Student Enrollment	2.8%	4.1%	5.2%
Total Teachers	11,146	11,295	11,608
Low-Income Students	41.6%	41.7%	50.6%
English-Language Learners	9.3%	10.3%	8.9%
Students with Disabilities	12.4%	N/A*	10.7%
African-American Students	2.4%	2.3%	2.2%
Hispanic Students	4.5%	4.6%	8.3%
White Students	20%	19.5%	13.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander Students	72.5%	72.9%	65.8%
Per Pupil Spending (Nominal Dollars)	\$8,997	\$12,399	\$11,823
Median Family Income	\$56,242	\$61,521	\$56,263
Adults with a B.A.	26.6%	29.3%	30.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education, *National Center on Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics and Common Core of Data*.

*Data were not collected on students with disabilities in the 2008–09 year.

The Role of Culture

David Moyer, acting director of the Hawaii Department of Education’s data analysis arm, notes, “Moving here really does feel like moving to another country, just one where your cell phone works and you use the same money. You know,” he adds, “Hawaii is deemed an overseas posting by the U.S. military.” Longtime former state Senate Education Chair and current Senator Jill Tokuda observes, “In Hawaii, if you try going somewhere else, you fall in the ocean. As a result, we’ll take the gloves off and fight, but we know that nobody is going anywhere and we have to find a way to work together.”

That culture coexists with an unusually unified structure. Matayoshi says, “We have a unified system. The SEA [state education agency] is the LEA [local education agency] ... Everyone has a common goal.” In practical terms, this means that there is no distinction between the state and local school district. In most states, the state oversees dozens or hundreds of districts (and, even in D.C., the state and district offices are distinct). In Hawaii, the state and the district are one and the same. Matayoshi routinely drops in on schools to see what’s happening in classrooms—she interacts with schools more like a district superintendent than a traditional state chief. Her deputy superintendent, Stephen Schatz, meets twice a month with all Complex Area Superintendents. Even the state department’s data chief is

in schools talking to staff about data collection and data use three to four times a month—a remarkably different situation than that of his colleagues across the nation. The result is a much higher degree of personal interaction and feedback than is found in most state systems.

In addition to operating as a single K–12 district, Hawaii also operates a single higher education system that encompasses all of the state’s four-year and two-year colleges and universities. Given the state’s small size and cultural norms, this makes for an unusual degree of coordination and collaboration. Schatz notes, “If the state superintendent needs something from the UH [University of Hawaii] president, she emails him directly. They talk routinely.” Notable is how responsive the university seems when it comes to embracing K–12’s priorities whereas, in many other states, higher education faculty and K–12 leaders talk past one another. John Morton, vice president of community colleges at the University of Hawaii, offers an anecdote that illustrates the closeness of the state Department of Education–university relationship. He says, “Kathy [Matayoshi] came back from a meeting in Tennessee where they’d talked about their success moving remediation down to the 12th grade so as to identify and help struggling kids before they enter college. She came back and asked me, ‘Can we do that here?’ I said, ‘Yes. Here’s the first-year college curriculum. You can test them on this.’ Boom, the next year, it was done.” In other states, just the preliminary planning for that kind of exercise can stretch over multiple years.

While Hawaii had a tradition of solid academic standards, curricula were not aligned to those standards until the push for accountability following the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Previously, one stakeholder recalls, “The behavior was to let 258 flowers bloom. The principals were the most powerful people in the district, so NCLB accountability was shocking—it was a jolt to the system.” Alex Harris, senior program officer at the influential Harold K. L. Castle Foundation, describes the change toward a more united system as a two-stage process: “There was a shift in pressure between 2005 and 2010. The pressure used to be compliance driven; it was a response to external pressures like federal NCLB and the need for schools to show results on state assessments. But, over time, mindsets changed as the agenda became more driven by the State Strategic

Plan, and the expectations became more internal.” He traced some of that later shift to policy developments like the state’s Race to the Top strategy and the adoption of the Common Core. As Tokuda explains, though, while the legislature *could* get hands-on with Hawaii’s single system, “Managing through statute is the last thing we want to do. It’s just ink on paper. The real work is implementing what actually goes on in the classroom.”

Part of the NCLB “jolt” was a newfound, evolving commitment to data. Hawaii enjoyed some advantages on this count. Because the state is the district, it didn’t just do high-level reports—it was relatively easy to track and report back to individual schools. Lacking internal expertise, Hawaii contracted with organizations like EdisonLearning and America’s Choice to partner with schools. The biggest impact, stakeholders report, may have been helping schools learn to collect and use data to drive improvement. As administrator Chad Farias says, “Collecting data for the sake of collecting data was a theme for a while,” but a focus on data’s role in informing instruction eventually transformed into how system leaders, school leaders, and teachers think about their work. Farias says, “Principals and teachers are now saying, ‘Wow, you only got 30% proficient? Why?’” This has led to increasing collaboration around student learning. A lot of states are marked by heated, high-level fights over policy change—or by the sense that nothing is happening absent policy change. Hawaii’s one major policy change was the decision to shift more power to school leaders and neighborhoods, and then to focus on using accountability and data to shape culture.

The Role of Policy

For those used to high-profile education policy fights on the mainland, it’s surprising how little stakeholders talk about policy when it comes to explaining Hawaii’s gains. When asked about key legislation, one veteran legislator paused for about 20 seconds before mentioning “bell schedules” and the push to make it easier for schools to adjust start times. Yet Hawaii’s improvement efforts were kick-started by policy. In 2004, the legislature enacted Act 51. Donald Horner, former chair of Hawaii’s Board of Education, describes Act 51 as the “turning point” in the state’s efforts. Act 51 sought to boost school autonomy and increase local control. It established a weighted student

funding formula, increased principals' control over their school budgets, created school community councils and parent-community networking centers, worked to reduce education bureaucracy, and more.¹⁹ It also gave the state Department of Education control over a slate of functions like facilities and budgeting. Tokuda says, "Most lawmakers don't understand what a game-changer Act 51 was. It was mostly a funding change, but also really a shift in how we empowered schools."

The 2008 recession slammed the Hawaiian economy, requiring massive budget cuts. The state Department of Education had to cut its \$1.8 billion budget by 14%.²⁰ When the teachers union rejected the cuts that other state employees had accepted, the state turned to furloughs as a way to avoid layoffs. The resulting furloughs shaved 17 days from the 2009–10 calendar, giving Hawaii the nation's shortest school year.²¹ Frustration with the stalemate fueled dissatisfaction with the state's elected Board of Education and triggered a push to shift to an appointed board. Historically, the unpaid board was elected through statewide elections that featured low turnout and were dominated by union-supported candidates. In April 2011, the new appointed board met for the first time and the new chair, Donald Horner, a former bank CEO, says, "In 2010, we spent \$1.36 billion. In 2012, we also spent \$1.36 billion, but we managed to reduce the size of the administration and put \$18 million back into classrooms."

Stakeholders suggest that, after a half-decade of rapid funding growth, the need to make do with less spurred creative thinking and new efficiencies. Joan Lewis, former vice president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, says, "Teachers knew they had to maximize every minute they had ... They had to figure out how to take 10 days of instruction and squeeze it into 9." Ronn Nozoe, currently at the U.S. Department of Education and previously the longtime Hawaii State Department of Education deputy superintendent, says, "When the budget got tough and the politics were really terrible, people got smarter for how to improve services for kids. During that time principals and teachers were looking at curriculum and tossing out stuff. It happened in a crisis, but it's good to look at scope and sequence and see what's duplicative. There was a sense of urgency that forced people to make tough choices." Nozoe argues that one "policy" change crucial for Hawaii's

success has been its sustained focus on standards. He says, "The driver for us really wasn't NCLB or Act 51, but the foundation laid by [former superintendent] Pat Hamamoto around standards-based education. That put the burden on teachers and principals to ensure that learners master the standards—whereas in the old norm-based system, the mindset was 'some students will learn, and some won't.' Over time, we built on that." By 2006, *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" was giving Hawaii a B+ on standards and accountability—compared with an average score of B- across the nation.²² In 2010, business and education leaders generally supported the adoption and implementation of the Common Core—a development far less controversial in Hawaii than on the mainland.

When Hawaii won a Race to the Top (RTT) grant of \$75 million in 2010, it struck locals as a surprising but validating victory. Karen Lee, executive director of Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education, says, "Seventy-five million may not be a big deal for other states, but it was a big deal for us. It helped galvanize the state." Moyer, data chief, says, "RTT made the state think differently about itself—the state started to use power it hadn't previously felt comfortable wielding." Of RTT, Superintendent Matayoshi says, "I'm glad we did it and I'm really glad it's over. I'm glad we did it because I don't think there's any other way we would've done all those things at once, especially with the limited capacity we had at the state office. But it was also very prescriptive. Now that we're past that, we want to tap the creativity of school leaders and unleash the power of schools." In assembling its RTT plan, the newly appointed board worked with Matayoshi's team to set a strategic plan with three emphases: student, staff, and system success. The dean of the College of Education at the University of Hawaii, Young says, "No one can yet say whether RTT had an impact on students. It's too recent. But it did lead to a lot of change." Two of the most prominent changes were the adoption of the Common Core and the negotiation of a new contract for teachers that introduced a new teacher evaluation system and linked pay to performance.

Hawaii has enjoyed an unusual degree of leadership stability. Since the 1990s, the state has been led by only three superintendents, all working from the same playbook. Pat Hamamoto became superintendent in 2001 after serving as deputy to Paul LeMahieu. Matayoshi followed in

Hamamoto's footsteps in 2010, after serving as her deputy. One key stakeholder recalls, "Prior to LeMahieu, the average superintendent in Hawaii lasted two and half years. And every time we had a new superintendent, whatever we had before was gone and we were doing something new." As Nozoe notes, Hawaii has held fast to Hamamoto's emphasis on standards-based practice for well over a decade. Indeed, since 2004's Act 51, the only major policy shifts were those required for RTT. Schatz says, "Because we did everything all at once [during RTT], it was overwhelming. But we haven't launched any new initiatives since. Now it's time to do them well."

P-20 and Alignment Done Right

In Hawaii, even the advocates and nonprofits are more focused on alignment and supporting the system than on promoting "reform." As a Hawaii Chamber of Commerce executive says, "We don't really think about policy. We just try to be supportive of what the department needs." In Hawaii, the recurrent theme is collaboration and making the system's component parts work together. This makes natural sense in a landscape that lacks big companies and big foundations, and in a state that's mostly off the radar of national foundations and advocacy groups. In Hawaii, foundations and groups that would be considered small elsewhere can have an outsized impact. Foundations like The Learning Coalition and the Castle Foundation that spend roughly \$2 million to \$3 million per year are among the biggest funders of system improvement.

Hawaii's small size and intimate culture magnify the collaboration. For instance, Morton of the community college system, who sits on the chamber of Commerce board of directors, casually mentions his close personal relationship with Superintendent Matayoshi. The superintendent routinely stops by the chamber to talk with business leaders. Perhaps Hawaii's signature collaboration is the Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education. While just about every state has some kind of P-20 partnership or P-20 council dedicated to strengthening the pipeline from early childhood through higher education—and while leaders in every state pay lip service to the importance of alignment—Hawaii's unified K-12 system, single university system, small size, and close working relationships make alignment much more than a slogan.

In the late 1990s, the president of the University of Hawaii and Paul LeMahieu, the then-state superintendent, coauthored a report outlining the need to align Hawaiian education from early childhood through higher education. In 2002, a P-20 council was formed and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation gave the University of Hawaii Foundation a \$500,000 planning grant. Those funds were used to launch the Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education, a statewide partnership between the Executive Office on Early Learning, the Hawaii State Department of Education, and the University of Hawaii System.²³ Over the next few years, P-20 was incubated at the University of Hawaii. Karen Lee, executive director of P-20, reflects the familiar Hawaiian comity when she says the mission was to support and push, but not to agitate. She explains, "We don't work outside of what agencies want to do. We work to oil the pathway from one agency to another." Although P-20 doesn't necessarily try to create policy, one stakeholder after another readily mentions the creation of P-20 when asked about key developments.

P-20 plays several practical roles. It runs innovative programs such as the Hawaii P-3 Initiative, which focuses on early learning, as well as services for high school students preparing for college. It also houses a statewide, cross-agency, longitudinal data system that links information between early learning, higher education, and the workforce. P-20 has helped agencies that used to operate independently to now share data and collaborate. P-20 also helps convene stakeholders to develop goals and strategies. One oft-cited example is the impact of P-20's push for "55 by '25." Launched in 2008, 55 by '25 is an initiative intended to ensure that 55% of working-age adults have a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. The effort was deemed hugely ambitious, but it also got universal buy-in across the state. At the same time, national foundation and P-20 supporter Lumina Foundation later suggested the goal should be 60%—and pushed P-20 to move its target. However, just as P-20 had initially rallied support for 55 by '25, it responded by standing its ground and insisting that 55% was the right target—regardless of what those on the mainland thought. The contrast is stark when comparing Hawaii with other states that careen from one goal to another as they seek to placate funders and advocates.

In 2009, P-20 released its initial College and Career Readiness Indicators (CCRI) Report. The reports presented information on how prepared Hawaii's high school graduates are to meet the DOE's "Vision of a High School Graduate." For the first time, data were released that showed where students were actually enrolling in college and whether they were prepared for college-level courses. Prior to 2009, all data had come from self-reported surveys from high school seniors, offering what turned out to be a highly inflated view of student college-going. When the report was released, says Castle Foundation CEO Terry George, there was a "huge outcry from high school principals." Lee says, "At the time, we got a lot of flak. High schools principals were very upset." Gradually, however, they came to understand its worth. Now, says Lee, "Principals ask when the reports are coming out. They're eager for them. The CCRI reports caused everyone to talk about data and college readiness differently."

P-20 is significant not only for the stakeholder involvement but for how it goes about its work. In many states, talk of P-20 is mostly a matter of platitudes and posturing, with little in the way of execution. In Hawaii, P-20 is not about meaningless mottos that don't amount to positive change, but about day-to-day efforts on the ground to support effective transitions and alignment. P-20 gets advice from the P-20 council comprised of leaders from the education, business, labor, and government community, but, more significantly, it has a staff of 28. The budget is almost entirely funded by major grants. This is markedly different than in other states, where P-20 organizations are pet projects of a particular governor, change leadership every few years, and have little in the way of sustained funding. In Hawaii, stakeholders take pains to note that P-20 is not seen as the governor's child and is distinctive for its independent presence.

Conclusion

In Hawaii, policy change seems to play a modest role in explaining the state's gains. Charter schools are not a big part of the story either. (While Hawaii has a substantial number of charter schools—they've long constituted 10% or more of the state's schools—they enroll only 2% or 3% of state students. Moreover, charter performance has been relatively weak.) Hawaii's story is also not one of a lot of

imported talent or meaningful changes to human capital policy—there was no movement on merit pay or teacher evaluation until the very end of the 2005–13 period. Yet, while stakeholders don't talk a lot about the changes, Hawaii's gains were ushered in by an era marked by efforts to ascribe to higher expectations of students and teachers via higher standards, boost school autonomy, give leaders more authority, and promote accountability.

Hawaii's larger story, though, is one of culture rather than policy. As longtime Deputy Superintendent Nozoe explains, "For us, it's about practice and culture. What matters is doing what you said you were going to do and doing it well. We focused on the quality and depth of implementation, and investing in the people doing the work—and protecting them from too many policy changes, which can leave people swinging in the wind. Everything we do in Hawaii we try to ground in the culture. We say, 'Stay the course, stay the course. We're going to move in the tide, but we know where we're going.'"

More than anything, Hawaii's success is chalked up by stakeholders to continuity, relationships, and collaboration. Hawaii's remarkable strategic alignment is evident in the habit of business leaders, foundation executives, state Department of Education officials, and others to talk about the goals in identical language and terminology. Finally, there's a clear awareness that Hawaii can and should do much better. As a former state board chair said when asked about Hawaii's outsized gains, "No one thinks Hawaii is all that successful yet. We're not that proud of where we are." Perhaps that's the secret of Hawaii's success.



[MARYLAND: A TALE OF PATIENCE AND CONTINUITY]

An affluent, highly educated state that encompasses prosperous suburbs surrounding the nation's capital, Maryland seems well positioned for educational success. Yet, in 2005, the state's performance was only middling. *Education Week's* 2006 "Quality Counts" report ranked Maryland 25th in the nation on NAEP performance.²⁴ Yet the state was already moving in the right direction. Starting in the 1990s, Maryland had made an intensive commitment to standards, the smart use of data, and accountability. The result? By 2013, Maryland boasted the nation's third-highest aggregate gains nationally since 2005.²⁵ Indeed, in 2012, Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government recognized Maryland as winning "the gold medal" for posting "the steepest overall growth trend" in the U.S. over the preceding two decades.²⁶

Despite Maryland's gains, it's hard to find stakeholders able to pinpoint specific changes in policy or practice that would account for its remarkable improvements. As one former state school board member puts it, "There was no real initiative. No big reform ... If anyone knows why Maryland improved so much, it would be pure conjecture." If anything, Maryland's results seem a testament to the power of coherence and staying the course. Maryland has just 24 school districts, with the three largest—Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and Baltimore County—accounting for one-third of the state's students. Maryland had just two superintendents between 1992 and 2015, while business leaders stood solidly behind their commitment to standards and accountability. The state put significant new dollars into its schools as part of a massive infusion called for by the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002. Between 2005 and 2013, Maryland boosted its per pupil spending by 41%, from \$9,800 to \$13,800, compared with a national average increase of 23%, from \$8,700 to \$10,700.²⁷ Maryland paired that spending with a focus on accountability and an emphasis on using data to steer school- and district-level spending decisions.

The Role of Accountability and Curriculum

When President George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law in 2001, many states rushed to devise and implement new standards, testing, and accountability systems. Because Maryland already had experience with all of those areas, NCLB served mostly to rev the motor on a long-standing standards and accountability regime. As Jack Smith, deputy state superintendent and former Calvert County superintendent, says, "When ESEA [the Elementary and Secondary Education Act] was signed, suddenly all school systems in the country knew student results would be disaggregated by student population and would be publicly reported. That was a jarring change." What proved so disruptive in states trying to catch up played out very differently in Maryland. Nancy Grasmick, who served as Maryland superintendent from 1991 to 2011, says, "Kentucky was probably the only other place doing [accountability and testing] the way Maryland was. Of course, we had to transition to NCLB, but the MSPAP [Maryland School Performance Assessment Program] taught us so much."

In 1972, the Maryland state legislature passed a law mandating statewide goal setting and testing and in 1982, the state introduced the Maryland Functional Testing Program (MFTP). At the time, each policy represented a pioneering development. Aligned to the Maryland curriculum, the MFTP assessed basic competencies in reading, mathematics, writing, and citizenship and passage was required for high school graduation. Seven years later, in 1989, the MFTP was revamped into the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). The MSPAP was widely regarded as a model assessment. Leslie Wilson, former director of assessment at the Maryland Department of Education, explains, "Tests were given in grades 3, 5, and 8. It was a performance assessment, not a test of multiple choice questions. Because this required more time, each student took one-third of the test and the results were compiled to provide a schoolwide picture. The test provided

Table 5: Maryland Snapshot 2005–13

	2004–05	2008–09	2012–13
Total State Population	5,546,935	5,684,965	5,891,819
Student Enrollment	865,561	843,861	859,638
Total District Schools	1,420	1,423	1,397
Number of Charter Schools	1	34	52
Charter School Students	0%	1.2%	2.3%
Total Teachers	55,101	58,940	57,718
Low-Income Students	32.1%	34.8%	42.8%
English-Language Learners	3%	4.7%	6.4%
Students with Disabilities	12.9%	N/A*	12%
African-American Students	38.1%	38%	35.1%
Hispanic Students	7%	9.5%	12.9%
White Students	49.5%	46.2%	41.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander Students	5%	5.9%	6%
Per Pupil Spending (Nominal Dollars)	\$9,815	\$13,449	\$13,829
Median Family Income	\$57,103	\$63,711	\$71,836
Adults with a B.A.	35.2%	35.4%	37%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics and Common Core of Data*.

*Data were not collected on students with disabilities in the 2008–09 year.

instructionally useful feedback without encouraging schools to engage in test prep.” Scores were publicly reported and schools and systems were accountable for the results. Wilson adds, “At that time, teachers were deeply involved in the accountability work. They helped write the items and devise the cut scores.”

In 2003, in accord with NCLB’s requirement that states test annually and produce results for each student in grades 3 through 8, the MSPAP was replaced by the Maryland School Assessment (MSA). While stakeholders lament that the new test was instructionally inferior to the MSPAP, they credit the new system with turbocharging Maryland’s efforts and delivering big gains in the years that followed. By 2006, *Education Week’s* “Quality Counts” report was awarding Maryland an A for “Standards and Accountability.”²⁸

Maryland’s efforts were characterized by a systemic focus on instruction and curriculum. In the late 1990s, Maryland had also started to require all teacher preparation programs to teach two courses in reading, and teachers were required to take reading courses when they pursued recertification. Henry Johnson, Maryland’s assistant state superintendent of curriculum and development, says, “Curricular frameworks mattered because they gave a level of consistency across the state. Districts could fill them in as they saw fit and helped design the frameworks that were subsequently used to steer assessment. That helped make for real consistency in terms of teaching.”

In 1999, Maryland’s Commission on Education Finance, Equity, and Excellence (also known as the “Thornton Commission” in honor of the chair, Dr. Alvin Thornton)

set about examining Maryland's school finance system. It deemed the system "unnecessarily complex, administratively burdensome, and not appropriately related to the needs of students or the ability of local school systems to meet those needs."²⁹ As a result, the legislature enacted the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act in 2002. The act restructured Maryland's public school finance system while boosting state aid to public schools by a total of \$1.3 billion between 2003 and 2008. The state coupled this massive new investment with the requirement that local districts submit annual plans detailing their strategies for improving academic achievement and measuring progress in meeting state performance standards. The deal was: more money, but school districts had to demonstrate that the new funds would be spent wisely and well. As Grasmick explains, "It really was strategic planning. We said to districts, 'Show us what you're doing with the money and tell us how it's working.'" By October of each year, school systems were expected to provide the state with an annual update to their master plan and to document their goals and strategies for improving achievement among all groups of students.³⁰ Once district officials became aware that they would have to justify their spending decisions, they upped their emphasis on data.

Stakeholders also credit Maryland's gains to the seriousness with which the state has approached graduation requirements in the past decade. As early as 1993, Maryland began developing High School Assessments (HSAs). It began field-testing these HSAs in 2000; students who started high school in 2005 were the first class to take the tests. The tests were administered in algebra, biology, English, and government and were used to evaluate both school and student performance. Theresa Alban, superintendent of Frederick County Schools, says, "It took from 2000 until 2005 to fully implement because we wanted people to see what was coming and to get instruction up to speed." That deliberate approach helped districts implement the new requirements with little pushback.

Coherence and Continuity

Maryland has enjoyed a remarkable run of leadership stability. Grasmick served a two-decade tenure as state superintendent, under four governors of both parties. Between 2003 and 2015, Republican Robert Ehrlich and Democrat Martin O'Malley offered similar support for

Maryland's testing, accountability, and curricular approach. Grasmick embodied an exceptional stability, especially compared with so many states that feature a revolving cast of school chiefs. Grasmick opines, "I don't think you can overestimate the importance of stability." In explaining Maryland's gains, one prominent superintendent suggests, "There was the Nancy Grasmick effect. She ruled with an iron fist. And she had more influence on districts than I've seen a state superintendent have in any other state." In 2012, Grasmick was succeeded by Lillian Lowery, who had served a well-regarded turn as state superintendent in Delaware.

With remarkable regularity, key stakeholders point to Maryland's small number of districts as a reason for the state's success. Whereas most states have scores, if not hundreds, of districts, Maryland has just 24. Insiders repeatedly point to that small number as an important factor in explaining Maryland's culture of trust and cooperation. The state superintendent meets with all of the local superintendents on a monthly basis, making it easier for district superintendents and the state chief to keep one another abreast of developments, preemptively address concerns, forge strong relationships, and facilitate cooperation across districts.

This sense of trust and cooperation extends not only across districts, but between the districts, state Department of Education, state Board of Education, and governor's office as well. In 2011, the Maryland Department of Education developed The Breakthrough Center to work with districts to address individual schools that were not meeting standards. Eschewing the takeover model, in which states move to take over schools or systems, Maryland's state leaders partnered with local district leaders to identify low-performing schools and devise a strategy for improving them. The Breakthrough Center works most closely with Maryland's "priority schools" and "focus schools." Priority schools are the lowest-achieving 5% of Title I schools in the state—there were 21 statewide in 2012–13. Focus schools are Title I schools "with a significant achievement gap between the 'all students' group and the lowest-performing subgroups." Monthly meetings between The Breakthrough Center's team and school and district staff aim to help schools eliminate barriers and impediments, and to address both operational and instructional challenges.³¹

The business community is widely credited with playing a critical role in catalyzing Maryland's improvement efforts. "If the business community wasn't there, we'd have probably succumbed to the same kind of mess that you see in other places," says James DeGraffenreidt, former chair of the state Board of Education. The Maryland Business Roundtable (MBRT), in particular, plays a pivotal role in steering and supporting improvement. Chaired by Gloria Flach of Northrop Grumman and founded in 1992 by defense industry titan Norm Augustine (then-CEO of Maryland-based Martin Marietta), MBRT made education its focus. It brought to bear a nonprofit coalition of nearly 100 leading employers, 3,000 volunteers, and a full-time staff of 8, while taking care to cultivate relationships with the superintendents, district staff, and lawmakers.³² June Streckfus, who retired as executive director of MBRT in 2014 after more than two decades at the helm, says, "We always had open access at any level. If people were reluctant to give us access, one quick phone call to the superintendent and that way opened up ... When [Martin] O'Malley came into office [as governor], there wasn't a week that I wasn't on the phone with his policy director."

In other states, says Streckfus, her counterparts often have "to send a letter to the superintendent in order to get questions answered." In Maryland, though, she says that educators and policymakers have welcomed business's involvement because, "We've been unambiguous that public education was our priority. We let people know that we had our teachers' backs." She says that business leaders have made a point of talking to teachers, soliciting their views, and presenting themselves as allies. "In a lot of places," says Streckfus, "it seems like a gotcha game. But in Maryland people knew we weren't out to get them." The state's long-standing emphasis on accountability is also credited with helping to maintain strong business and legislative support for school spending. DeGraffenreidt says, "Even in depths of the recession, the legislature held education harmless. No matter who was governor, Republican or Democrat, the funding was there because everyone was confident there was accountability and that the funds would be used to improve performance."

Early Childhood Education

In discussing Maryland's outsized gains, stakeholders repeatedly mention the state's commitment to early childhood education. Johnson says, "We have seen more and more students entering kindergarten already reading, with a level of numeracy and an understanding of math higher than we've ever seen before."

Even before 2005, and long before "universal pre-K" became a nationally recognized catchphrase, Maryland moved to significantly expand its spending on early childhood education. In 1978, the Maryland State Board of Education proposed an Extended Elementary Education Program that would provide pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds labeled "at-risk." Within a year, Maryland's legislature funded the program.³³ At the time, just nine other states had initiated a pre-K program.³⁴ The preschool program began as a pilot in Baltimore City and Prince George's County, with Title I and Chapter I schools eligible for funds and all four-year-olds zoned for those schools permitted to enroll.³⁵ The program subsequently morphed into the statewide Prekindergarten Program, serving all of Maryland's at-risk four-year-olds.

In 2002, the legislature enacted the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, which included a timetable for expanding the state's pre-K systems. Starting in 2003–04, all school districts would receive dedicated funds from the state to provide pre-kindergarten to four-year-olds eligible for free or reduced lunch. By 2007–08, the program was expanded to ensure districts could offer a seat to all eligible four-year-olds through a combination of local education dollars and state aid.³⁶ In 2005, 31% of Maryland's four-year-olds were enrolled in pre-K—nearly twice that year's national average of 17%.³⁷ By 2013, the share of four-year-olds enrolled in pre-K nationally had increased to 28% while Maryland's rate had crept up to 35%.³⁸

In 2000, Maryland created a readiness assessment exam for incoming kindergarteners that measured whether kids were prepared with the basic skills and behavior needed for kindergarten. The Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) assessment was designed in response to the National Education Goal Panel's recommendation that all children should enter school ready to learn by 2000. According to

Rolf Grafwallner, assistant superintendent at the Maryland Department of Education, the test measured critical skills in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, health, personal and social development, and physical development. It contained objectives that addressed such factors as whether children had letter and number recognition, had print awareness, or could copy patterns. The focus on measuring what kids knew before they started school helped support system alignment and created “a common goal and language of how parents, teachers, and providers can support young children’s learning.”³⁹

In 2005, a Division of Early Childhood Development was created at the Maryland Department of Education to support pre-K education and facilitate coordination of state services. By 2013, Maryland’s efforts on the early childhood front had earned an A from *Education Week* for its educational alignment policies. By creating a school-readiness definition, assessment, intervention, and standards, Maryland sought to link early learning with K-12—and eventually higher education and the world of work. With the MMSR data, it was possible to see whether students were actually prepared for kindergarten and to then track the impact of pre-K instruction on performance in the elementary grades on

the MSA. A 2015 study by the Maryland State Department of Education found that MMSR performance was positively associated with MSA performance and concluded that “these findings suggest that early learning successes lead to later school successes.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

Key stakeholders attribute Maryland’s success to an ability to maintain a steady path, deliberately introduce programs, and involve teachers and other stakeholders. Frederick County Superintendent Theresa Alban says, “What NCLB tried to do, Maryland was already in the process of doing. A lot of people in other states were saying, ‘This is a great idea,’ while people in Maryland were asking, ‘You don’t already do that?’ What was specified under those programs had already become our way of doing business.” She continues, “If you’re going to transform and rethink instruction, it takes time ... but we were doing the accountability thing before it came into vogue nationally. There was a true professional learning community across the state, in which we knew what was happening elsewhere and collaborated across systems.” One stakeholder after another credits that accountability head start as explaining

MARYLAND SUPERINTENDENTS



Nancy S. Grasmick had served as Maryland’s state superintendent for 20 years when she retired in June 2011. At the time of her retirement, she was the longest-serving state superintendent in the nation. Grasmick began her career teaching deaf students in Baltimore before taking on several administrative roles. She was appointed superintendent in 1991 and went on to serve four governors. “For years, education policy in the state was synonymous with one name: Nancy Grasmick. . . . She was as deft a political player as there is,” observes Josh Kurtz, a veteran Maryland pundit. “She was the closest thing to a bulletproof, politically made woman as there is in this state. . . . Governors came and went, but ‘St. Nancy’ was always there.”⁴¹

Lillian Lowery was appointed Grasmick’s successor in 2012. Josh Starr, former superintendent in Montgomery County, Maryland, notes that Lowery was “dealt a tough hand. She was following an icon.” Prior to arriving in Maryland, Lowery had served as Delaware’s education secretary after holding a variety of teaching and administrative positions in Virginia, Indiana, and North Carolina. During her time as Maryland’s state chief, Lowery focused on the state’s efforts to implement the Common Core standards and a new teacher evaluation framework. Lowery resigned from her post in fall 2015.

why the NCLB era coincided with such substantial gains in Maryland's schools.

Maryland's story is not one of dramatic departures or controversial policies. Charter schools enroll just a handful of the state's students. Stakeholders note that federal Race to the Top funds prompted some new changes to standards and teacher evaluation after 2010, but suggest that any impact would not have been visible during the 2005–13 period (indeed, the state's performance slumped between 2011 and 2013). When asked about the keys to Maryland's success, stakeholders bring up a steady list of familiar virtues: persistence, accountability, collaboration, and a commitment to ensuring that new dollars are spent in smart and responsible ways. Of course, in the world of K–12 schooling, where so many states jerk from one fad to another, maybe that approach *does* count as a dramatic departure.

[LESSONS FROM THREE LEADERS]

The impressive gains registered by Washington, D.C., Hawaii, and Maryland between 2005 and 2013 make clear that there is no single path to educational improvement. When one looks to these states for the secrets to a decade of pace-setting improvement, one finds some key similarities and a few stark differences. While advocates, federal officials, and various experts can sometimes make it sound like there is a clearly understood recipe for improvement, these three states illustrate that there may be very different routes to success.

The approaches in each state have been colored by local conditions, culture, and context. Washington, D.C., transformed a failing, dysfunctional system through dramatic changes that addressed governance, policy, school choice, leadership mindset, and management of the teacher workforce. Hawaii used modest efforts to enhance school autonomy and a culture of intense collaboration—fueled by the discipline imbued by tough budgetary times—to energize a lethargic, poor-performing system. And Maryland saw its commitment to standards and accountability pay off when new funding, an increase in early childhood education, and a data-driven culture turbo-charged its response to the advent of No Child Left Behind-style accountability.

There were also important similarities across the three states. None were doing especially well in 2005; indeed, Washington, D.C., and Hawaii were faring pretty horrifically. All three states are small in terms of both area and population, facilitating collaboration and communication. Washington, D.C., and Hawaii each constitute a single school district, while Maryland has just 24. In each state, municipal and business leaders worked hard to support improvement efforts—partly because they felt confident that new dollars were being spent responsibly and productively. Each of the three states spent more per pupil than the average state in 2005, and each increased spending between 2005 and 2013 at a rate that exceeded the national average. Stakeholders in each state frequently cite the important role of standards and accountability. Finally, all three states demonstrated an extraordinary degree of continuity in leadership and school improvement strategy.

At the same time, there were some profound differences in how the three states tackled the work of educational improvement. Publicly funded school choice is a crucial part of the story in D.C. but a nonstory in Maryland and Hawaii. D.C. embraced radical governance change and launched pioneering initiatives to reshape the teacher workforce, while such changes were largely absent in Hawaii and Maryland. Maryland invested heavily in pre-K, which was less central to Hawaii's progress. Maryland's improvement efforts were well under way by the mid-1990s, while Hawaii and Washington, D.C., got started much later. Hawaii consciously moved control over facilities and budgeting into the state Department of Education to give the system more control of its resources, while reformers in Washington, D.C., shifted major responsibilities from the school district to the city in order to reduce the demands on the system.

Surveying all of these factors, and after talking to a myriad of stakeholders about their experiences and lessons learned, at least seven takeaways merit note.

Persistence Counts: Perhaps the most obvious common denominator across the three states is that they pursued the same approach to school reform for more than a decade. In the churning, fad-filled world of K-12, this makes these three states unique. It's easy to forget, as advocates, foundations, and prestigious faculty tout their wares, that the key to getting good at anything is generally a matter of practice and discipline. And, if there is a secret ingredient, it may be these states' remarkable willingness and ability to do just that. Indeed, the 2015 NAEP results show that Washington, D.C., and Hawaii, which continued their long-running strategies, led the nation in gains during the 2005 to 2015 period—just as they had between 2005 and 2013. Meanwhile, as previously noted, Maryland has exhibited a precipitous decline in NAEP performance in the two years since 2013, as well as a modest slump from 2011 to 2013. While some of the decline is due to testing more children with special needs, it's worth noting that the downturn coincided with the state's first turbulence in the state superintendency in two decades and a series of disruptive changes introduced as part of the state's Race to the Top reforms.

THREE TIPS FROM THE NATION'S MOST IMPROVED STATE

Not only did Washington, D.C., post the nation's biggest NAEP gains between 2005 and 2013, but it did so in one of the most dysfunctional and difficult environments. Given that achievement, it's worth sharing tips on leadership, team communication, structural change, and philanthropy from three of D.C.'s key leaders.

Former mayor Vincent Gray describes the importance of a strong relationship between elected officials and appointed educational leaders. He says, "I didn't have to meet with Kaya [Henderson] every week, but I chose to. Our meetings were every Wednesday. We used them as opportunities for honest dialogue. It was just the two of us. We asked things like, 'What kind of problems are you having? Is it a legitimate issue? How do you think we can solve it?' My advice to others is that communication is so fundamentally important to making this work. It's one thing to say 'mayoral control' and another thing to define it and create a climate where it works. Mayoral control is an approach to governance that permits public education to enjoy easier access to other vitally important publicly operated services."

Michelle Rhee says it was critical that Mayor Adrian Fenty fought to give the district the ability to fire central office staff. "We needed to send a message that if you're not producing results and can't do your job effectively, you need to go." She continues, "People were telling me you don't need legislation to do this, that it was too much noise, and that you can deal with this in other ways. You can rewrite the job description and make people reinterview for a job. But to me, that was just a short-term fix. What if you hire the wrong person? I wasn't arrogant enough to think we'd get all our hires right. Are you supposed to keep doing those workarounds? We needed a structural change, not just for one time but to establish a foundation going forward."

Philanthropic support plays a critical role, but it needs to play its part with care. Kaya Henderson notes, "Philanthropy matters a lot because when you work for institutions, it's very hard to change budgets radically. In order to show something different, you often need outside dollars. One of the untold stories about IMPACT system is that we developed it with a \$250,000 grant from a local foundation. You don't need huge numbers. Once we were able to show that these results paid off, we could get the support to do the work. Philanthropy lets us pilot and innovate." Finally, warns Henderson, it's easy to get caught up chasing money—but it's crucial for state leaders to avoid that chase, and for foundations to avoid the temptation to create distractions.

Structural Change Is a Means to Cultural Change: Michelle Rhee may be one of the nation's most controversial and hard-edged reformers of the past decade, but even she makes clear that it's easy for observers to learn the wrong lesson from her tenure. She is unapologetic about her moves to raise the bar, fire low performers, and reward excellence, but she says that too many observers forget that these measures are not an end—they're simply a means to the real goal, which is changing culture. As Rhee put it, "Before curriculum and structural changes stick, you have to change the culture." Kaya Henderson, Rhee's deputy and then her successor, says that DCPS was able to focus on nurturing classroom

excellence only after it addressed the system's structural problems. A dysfunctional organization makes it impossible to establish a productive educational culture.

Don't Underestimate the Power of Culture: In the case of Hawaii, stakeholders noted time and again that hiring and firing is just not a feasible strategy to drive improvement. As one veteran reformer observes, "We're an island. We get 100 Teach For America teachers a year. Pretty much all our other new teachers come out of the University of Hawaii. If we fire them, it's not like we've got replacements. That's the reality." This makes for an improvement model that

relies heavily on collaboration, trust, and encouragement. That approach might not work in a larger environment or one where anonymity is easier to come by, but connecting leaders in K-12, higher education, business, philanthropy, and government proves to be a profound lever in the right circumstances.

Execution IS Reform: One key commonality across the three states was an intense focus on executing their reform agenda, whatever it was. These states did not set off after every new idea du jour. Maryland got serious about standards, testing, and accountability in the 1990s and about preschool in the early 2000s. Hawaii's P-20 helps the state keep its eye on the ball and focuses on execution rather than policy change—even in the face of changing currents in mainland thinking. D.C.'s Kaya Henderson notes that a "vital part of execution is building up communications and mobilizing our supporters. And that's one place where business and civic leaders play a hugely important role." Big school improvement ideas often run aground on the rocky shoals of execution. In these states, execution tended to come first.

Policy Can Help in Many Ways: Advocates tend to fall in love with and sell particular sets of policy prescriptions, but these states illustrate that policy can play a vital role in spurring and supporting improvement in many different ways. Washington, D.C., benefited from state-level governance reform, charter school legislation, and changes in the job protections for central office staff, as well as district policy changes to teacher evaluation and pay. In Maryland, policy changes provided a commitment to accountability, pre-K, and added funding, combined with a clear expectation that the use of funds would be data driven. In Hawaii, Act 51's decentralization, along with Race to the Top's prescriptions regarding the Common Core and teacher evaluation, fueled a school-based, standards-driven approach. In each place, these policies helped make possible the softer changes that carried improvement forward.

It's about People, Stupid: Much discussion of education reform tends to play out in impersonal terms. But when one talks to key stakeholders in these successful states, what's evident is how much time and effort they've spent working to humanize their initiatives. While these states are all committed to data-driven decisions and are big believers that results are what matter, conversations with key stakeholders reflect

a premium on discussing these measures in human terms. Leaders acknowledge the difficulties for educators, express empathy, and talk about the importance of recognizing and encouraging professionals. These conversations are vital, because schools are the most human of institutions. Unfortunately, that way of talking is not as common in many other locales.

All School Reform Is Local: There's a natural tendency for reformers to look across national boundaries or state lines, see where the results are promising, and conclude, "We should do that!" But an important lesson is that successful reform in a given locale is a product of politics, structure, culture, and history—that what works in one place may not work in another. Several stakeholders declared that Nancy Grasmick's leadership style worked in Maryland because of the small number of districts, but it wouldn't have worked in states configured differently. The Rhee-Henderson reforms were possible in D.C. only due to mayoral control. Hawaii's culture-first approach may work well for an insular, consensus-oriented island state organized as a single district, but not in another context. The lesson is a counsel not of despair but of hope—it's that lots of reform strategies can work, but that they need to be adopted and executed with an eye to local realities.

States succeed at educational improvement when key stakeholders adopt a strategy, stick to it, collaborate as they put it to work, and then pursue it thoughtfully and courageously. In Hawaii and D.C., stakeholders tended to talk about stages—of moving from "stage one to stage two" when thinking about accountability or teacher management. In all three locales, stakeholders mention the critical role of statewide leaders. In Washington, D.C., it's the mayor. In Maryland, it was a series of governors and a strong state chief. In Hawaii, it's P-20 and a supportive, on-the-ball university system. The wrong question to ask any of these states may be, "What's the secret ingredient?" They don't have one. What they do offer, though, is the ability to teach valuable lessons about the importance of talking honestly about shortcomings, putting forward sensible solutions, mustering support, staying the course, and focusing on implementation. For laggards seeking to become leaders, those are lessons worth learning.

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Hess has edited widely cited volumes on the Common Core, the role of for-profits in education, education philanthropy, school costs and productivity, the impact of education research, and No Child Left Behind. He serves as executive editor of *Education Next*, as lead faculty member for the Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program, and on the review board for the Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools. He also serves on the boards of directors of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers and 4.0 SCHOOLS. A former high school social studies teacher, he teaches or has taught at the University of Virginia, the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown University, Rice University, and Harvard University. He holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in government, as well as an M.Ed. in teaching and curriculum, from Harvard University.

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